

REEFER BOY

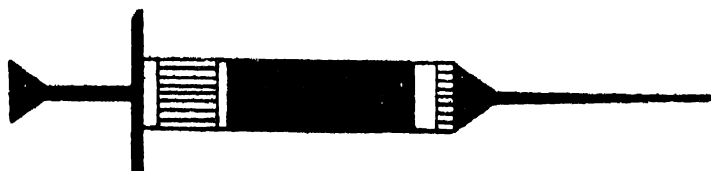
ABOUT THIS BOOK

FROM the reeking slums of a big city, from the twilight world of escape-hungry 'junkies', comes this striking and powerful novel of tormented adolescents—neglected by society, victimised by ruthless dope pedlars.

Reefer Boy is the story of drug addiction and its menacing attraction for juveniles. The hero is 16-year-old Chico and his friend Angel, and the book shows their inevitable moral and physical destruction through their craving for drugs.

The material of this book is sensational, but this is not a sensational novel. It is based on fact—the shameful, inescapable fact that society takes no responsibility for these lost and bitter children.

So long as we permit these sordid conditions to exist, stories *Reefer Boy* will be true.



ALSO BY HAL ELLSON

Duke

Tomboy

Summer Street

Hal Ellson

REEFER BOY

A story of teen-age drug addicts



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For Catherine and Suzanne-Jo, equally.

chapter I

CHICO'S DREAMS were pleasant, wondrous even, though they always finished on a note of frustration, each ending having a way of denying the whole. And coming awake meant facing reality again and his need, the ever-increasing demand that his body and mind now made upon him. But this was a new kind of dream for him—nightmare really—as if reality had intruded into that lazy world which never before had known harshness.

Awake now, he looked about the room and in the dim light it appeared strange, though nothing had changed. No sound in the house, either; utterly quiet, it gave off a feeling of abysmal emptiness. And he was sweating, covered with sweat, the sheets beneath him soaked and chilling him, but he didn't move. Instead, he listened, trembling meanwhile, but still heard no sound, not even a whispered echo of the scream which had leaped from his throat, no footsteps approaching his room. Waiting, he realized at last no one was home. He stared at his arms and found them marked with the usual telltale tiny punctures but not horribly scabbed. That had been

part of the dream which he now recalled. In the dream scabs had appeared, large as his fist, and every time he knocked one off another larger one appeared in its place, frightening him till at last he had screamed out in his sleep. He was still trembling, even though he knew now there was nothing to fear, nothing to face but the day.

Or was it day? The dim light in the room denied the hour, making him wonder if he had slept through the whole day. It must be near night, he thought, and his eyes went to the clock. The hands pointed rigidly to one, but perhaps the clock had stopped. He heard it then, its ticking waking in the silence, growing louder till he heard it beating in his brain. His pillow, which he flung at it, silenced it for good. Finally he stood up shakily and, avoiding the mirror, he dressed as quickly as his fumbling hands would allow and hurried from the room, forgetting the broken clock which lay upon the floor.

In the kitchen, he looked about but carefully avoided the small mirror above the sink, not wanting to meet himself. He couldn't eat, didn't need food, didn't need anything any more but the stuff, the white powder which made the world go round. He lived for that now, had to have it. It was always on his mind, dictating the terms by which he lived. Not that he believed this yet, for he thought he was in control. It hadn't got him. It was just that it was good, made him feel better, think better, see everything in a better light.

But even now the feeling was upon him, not that he was sick, but he would be soon enough if he didn't get it, and that was to be avoided at all costs. But he had no money. In a useless gesture his hands went to his pockets. "Broke!" he said aloud. "Flat broke!" Which meant he had to hustle, for the money had to come from somewhere—and always did. Beg, borrow or steal, it didn't matter. There had been a time when his pride kept him up, for he was different, he thought, no ordinary junkie. He had told himself he wasn't going to be like the others, but somewhere along the way he'd slipped. He didn't want to think about that now. Thinking didn't help, thinking was useless. Only one thing mattered. He walked toward the door, opened it and started down the dim stairway.

In that moment the house suddenly came alive with its sounds and odors. People were arguing in an apartment on the floor above, and music sounded from the floor below. He laughed to himself and hurried down the stairs into the street,

went almost jauntily to the corner and looked around. The corner was empty but at that hour it was apt to be, so he was not disturbed. But he had to find Angel, for Angel was his friend, the only person he really trusted now. The two of them shared everything.

"Angel will give me a fix," he told himself. "He'll have the stuff."

He tried the poolroom, but Angel wasn't there. No one had seen him, either, or had any idea where he was. Outside again, he looked around, then started for Angel's house. He lived around the corner, three flights above the street. Chico was breathing hard when he reached Angel's door. He'd run up the stairs, confident that he'd find Angel home. When he knocked, no one answered. He called then and knocked again, harder this time, and finally rattled the loose doorknob, thinking Angel might be sleeping yet. But Angel didn't answer, no one did, and something went out of him then. The first real touch of anxiety and fear started him trembling again. Suppose they got Angel, he thought, and his concern was more for himself than for his friend, for he needed the stuff. But they'd never get Angel, he told himself. Angel was too smart, too hip. He was out making the dollar, or he'd already made it and was hitting up some place. That was it.

Chico moved toward the stairs now, laughing to himself. He'd find his boy upstairs on the roof landing or on the roof itself. Angel would take care of him. But Angel wasn't on the roof landing nor on the roof. No one was there. Fear struck at him again. Suppose he couldn't find Angel? And what if he couldn't get hold of some money to get the stuff? Again he thought that Angel had been picked up, for the cops were wiser now, strange faces moved through the neighborhood with that look that warned any one who knew the Law. Things were getting hotter. Maybe they got Angel, but on the other hand he could have been goofing off with a load of stuff.

The last thought angered Chico now. His best friend doing him in? He could expect that from anyone else but not Angel. Not his best pal. But Chico knew the power of the drug, what it did to guys, what it had made him do. He had stolen from his own mother, had come to that, and yet there had been a time when he stood on the corner and denounced a friend for the same act. He remembered exactly how he had said it too. "Any guy who steals from his own mother to get the stuff

ought to be kicked to death." A year ago he'd been able to say that because he didn't know anything about the drug and didn't know what was going to happen to himself. Since then more than that had happened, he'd gone lower, but there were no self-accusations now; it was simpler to shift the burden of his guilt and accuse Angel.

But even that didn't last, for it was better to believe that Angel hadn't gone back on him, better to believe he'd find his friend with a pile of stuff. He'd be alone, too, if he broke off with Angel and he didn't want that, for Angel meant something to him. His last and only real friend. The others had all gone their way. Some wouldn't look at him any more, didn't know him, those who hadn't got messed up with the drug. Then there were the others, the junkies like himself whose friendship lasted as long as he had money or the stuff. He knew all of them, though, had them marked, the treacherous ones and those who'd whine and lick his feet for a fix. But Angel was important because something had happened to him in the process of addiction. First, his old friends had taken to avoiding him, though he saw this the other way around, believing he had given them up. Then there were the others, those like himself who took the drug; he knew many junkies simply because the drug alone drew them together and they were all in the same boat. But these were acquaintances. They didn't belong to that first, select circle of conservative gents—half a dozen friends who were really friends. The number of friends had narrowed to that small number, then diminished still more when he found out what they were like. Only Angel could be trusted, or depended upon to share and share alike, and he needed him.

So now he was willing to believe in him again, and thought: He might be down the cellar. There were any number of places where Angel might be, but as he started down the stairs toward the cellar, Chico prayed that he'd find him there. "I hope he's there, or I don't know what I'll do," he told himself when he reached the cellar door, then stopped and listened. No sound from below, no light. He went down into semidarkness and made his way to the back, where Angel had fitted out a small room which they sometimes used when they got high. The door to this room was locked but he had a key and opened it; not because he thought Angel was there, he knew he wasn't. Inside the room he turned the dim light on, feeling sick in

the stomach now, feeling bad, but he looked around, thinking, Maybe he's got his H down here. That was possible. He began to search quickly. There were any number of places in the room where the stuff could be hidden but they yielded nothing. Then, as he flipped over the pillow of a chair which Angel had dragged in from the street, he saw the cellophane package. Most likely it had slipped between the pillow and the chair and not been missed, for Angel wasn't so stupid as to hide it there. But no matter how it got there, it was his now, a half of a sixteenth—enough to shoot up twice. As he held the package in his hands he felt his sickness leave him, the tension subside. At the moment it was enough merely to hold it, know that he had it.

But he couldn't stay here, he had to get out fast. He dropped the package in his pocket, turned to the door, then stiffened. Someone was coming down the stairs. He heard slow footsteps as if whoever it was was uncertain of himself and not familiar with the cellar. It's the Law, he thought, and was stricken with fear. There was no place to run, nor could he hide the stuff. They'd nail him anyhow, so he waited, ready to bluff it out, and listened to the footsteps shuffling across the concrete floor. It wasn't the Law, cops never walked like that, but he was still tense till he heard someone say, "Is that you, Angel?" Chico knew who it was but didn't answer, not till Tito walked into the room and faced him. Then he said, "Angel ain't here. What do you want?" But he already knew what Tito wanted, he could see it in his face and eyes.

Tito was watching Chico. His eyes searched the room then and came back to Chico's. "What you doing down here?" he asked.

"Nothing," Chico answered. "I was just leaving and I thought I heard a noise."

That was the wrong thing to say, for it alerted Tito and he looked around the room again, then searched Chico's face for the signs. There were no signs but Tito was still suspicious. He could smell when the stuff was around, or smell money. He was one of those whom Chico hated, the kind who'd eat dirt to get it, who was always around when a free fix was in the offing but who wouldn't give you a smell of the stuff if he had a mountain of it and you were dying. He stared at Chico now and said in a hoarse whisper, "You got the stuff?"

"No, man, do I look like I got it?" Chico said, raising his voice.

Tito wilted, his face assumed a sad expression but his eyes retained the same sharp look; he was wise, he knew something was in the wind and intended to stay close, but Chico wanted no part of him. Even if he had had a load of stuff he wouldn't throw any to Tito. He waited for him to go, but Tito stood there with the same look on his face, the same alert expression in his eyes. He wasn't going to move, he knew something was up, smelled it and hoped to get in on it. But he wasn't going to get in on it, Chico told himself, and inside he was angry, boiling enough to smash Tito in the face. He wanted to let go at him but couldn't do that. It was better to play it cool and get rid of him. He moved to the door. "Man, I'm locking up," he said.

Tito followed him out of the room and waited while he locked the door. As they left the cellar Chico said, "You see anything of Angel today?"

Tito shook his head. "He wasn't on the scene. I know cause I've been scouting."

Chico knew this was the truth and again felt that Angel had let him down, but he didn't care, didn't need Angel or anyone else at the moment because he had the stuff to carry him for a while. But he had to get rid of Tito first, shake him off, for neither he nor anyone else was going to share with him. They were moving down the block now, not talking. I've got to shake him, got to get rid of him, Chico thought, and a feeling of nausea came over him followed by a desire to smash Tito for tagging along. I want it for myself, why don't he let me be? But Tito stayed with him to the corner, not realizing that Chico had the pack on him, but knowing if he kept with him long enough and Chico got sick, he'd pawn something to get it, pawn anything, then he might share with him. That could happen, would happen, he knew, but as they rounded the corner Chico suddenly turned on him, his patience gone.

"Man," he said, raising his voice, "I got something to do. I'm going home, so lay off me!"

Stung, Tito drew back, almost cringing, for he was afraid of Chico and there was nothing he could do now; his hopes were shattered but he didn't show his hate, only smiled a painful smile.

"I'm beat," he said in a pleading voice. "I'm really beat."

Just till tomorrow, all I need is a buck." He waited hopefully.

Chico stared at him. He wanted to spit in his face, wanted to smack that fawning face before him but all he did was walk away.

He was almost running when he reached the house. The hall door slammed behind him and he took the stairs two steps at a time, then locked his own door behind him and, because no one was home, decided to shoot up in the kitchen. He had already emptied the caps in the spoon and was cooking the drug when a knock sounded on the door. He was shaking even before he started the ritual preparations and the knock unnerved him so completely that he dropped the spoon and its precious contents on the floor—then stood frozen to the spot. Another knock sounded and he heard Angel's voice. His anger boiled then for having lost the stuff and he moved toward the door to open it. Angel stepped in and they stared at each other.

"What are you doing?" Angel said suspiciously. Chico didn't answer. "You look high. Got any stuff?"

With that Chico lashed out and struck him in the mouth.

"What's that for?" Angel said, taken back.

"Cause you made me drop a half a sixteenth beating on the door like that."

"Beating? I tapped, man. Yeah, you're trying to burn me, that's why you dropped it, you don't want to give me any."

"Yeah, if that's the way you feel, I got another half and I'm not going to give you a drop, see? You can crawl on your belly, pal." Chico turned away and picked up the fallen spoon. Angel watched him begin preparations again, and didn't move until all six caps were in the spoon, ready to be cooked. Then he jumped, struck the spoon from Chico's hand and at the same time punched him in the face. The next moment they went at each other like two jungle animals; chairs went flying, the table turned over and fell with a crash, they fought their way into the next room where they sprawled on the floor and got up as one, but Chico's strength was gone. A head butt had split his lip, there was nothing left in him, not even anger; besides, Angel had the strength to beat his brains out. He backed away, gasping. Angel followed. There was no expression on his face, he was no longer angry, either, and wanted to end it, and did, too, by suddenly lunging at his friend and hurling him upon the couch. He pinned him there with his arms

above his head and they stared at each other, not as two who had shared everything but like two strangers who had never met before.

chapter 2

"WHY'D YOU hit me when I walked in?" Angel asked, his face expressionless. He was standing now, his arms at his sides.

"Cause I found a sixteenth and you knocked on the door and I dropped half of it," Chico answered. "Ain't that reason enough? So then you had to belt me and make me lose the other half."

"Yeah, well, you got me real angry when you started cooking it in front of me. That was worse than a punch in the mouth."

It was worse than anything, Chico knew, a real way of getting back at Angel, but now it was over, they'd both got in their licks and were satisfied.

"So you want to shake on it?" Chico asked.

"Yeah," said Angel, and they shook hands and were friends again, but Chico, remembering the agonizing, fruitless search he had made, looked at Angel suspiciously. "Where were you?" he suddenly asked. "I been searching every place."

"Every place but the right place." Angel took out his cigarettes and tossed one to Chico, then lit up.

"I was looking for you and when I couldn't find you I figured you burned me, so I burned you," Chico went on.

"And dropped everything. Now we're both out in the cold. I was out looking around. I even went downtown to my mother's job."

"You didn't get any money?" Chico asked hopefully.

"She didn't have nothing."

"Man, my sickness!"

"You ain't the only one, Chico. Let's pull a job. It's money we need."

Chico stood up and lit his cigarette off Angel's, then quickly straightened the room and righted the table and chairs in the

kitchen. It was getting late, almost dark, and the family would be coming home soon. They hurried down the stairs and out of the house. The street lamps were lit, a light rain was falling but neither of them noticed it. Their minds were on one thing only.

"Man, I'm sick. Can't you think of anything?" Chico said at the corner. "Haven't you got anything at home?"

"My aunt's got a radio but she'll miss that."

"Like your uncle's cornet."

They laughed, recalling the incident of the cornet. Desperate, they had gone to the house where Angel's uncle lived, climbed to the roof and come down the fire escape to steal the cornet from under a bed, then hurried to a pawnshop. The pawnbroker was suspicious and asked first if it was theirs, and told Angel to blow it when he claimed the cornet. And Angel wasn't able to raise a note. They were told to leave then, and while going down the street they walked into Angel's uncle.

"That was a real bad night," Chico recalled, and they laughed again, then suddenly quieted, for this night, too, threatened to be a bad one and they were getting nowhere fast. It was raining harder and they were aware of it but didn't care. Nothing mattered so long as they got the drug but the streets were emptying and it was still too early to break into a store. They prowled around. The easiest thing now would be to snatch a pocketbook and run for it. They were adept at that, but the rain wasn't helping and it seemed to them that no one in the world was walking the streets but themselves.

"We got to get it fast now," Chico said. "I'm feeling desperate."

"Me, too," Angel said. They turned around, walking to a dark block which they knew well. They had worked it too many times before so that it wasn't safe, but they didn't think of that now. They reached the corner and stepped into a doorway to wait.

The rain fell harder, splattering against the sidewalk. Chico heard it faintly. His eyes were searching the empty street, the dark row of houses across the way. No one was there, no one anywhere, the whole world had gone dead. Nobody'll come till this lets up, he thought, and it isn't going to let up. A woman turned the corner and he came alert. Angel braced. They let her come. She was on the other side of the street and

unaware, they knew. They waited, never taking their eyes from her.

"This one's mine," Chico said. The block was clear, no one else on it but the woman. He saw the pocketbook she was carrying, how she held it high under her arm, an easy take. All he had to do was make the grab but he waited till she was twenty yards from the lamppost, then moved swiftly, crossed the street and started after her. A dull ache in his stomach now, but he didn't think of it and closed in fast. She was near the lamppost, almost under it, and he was close behind, moving noiselessly, eyes on her pocketbook, afraid he might fail to get it but certain, if he did, that he wouldn't be caught. It was all in grabbing it, but as he closed in, the woman became aware of him and crossed the street, then turned to look at him. In that moment he felt it was all up, but he kept walking as if unaware of the woman and told himself he couldn't let her get away. It had to be this one, had to be, and suddenly he started for her, running soundlessly, reached her, grabbed the pocketbook—and she screamed.

But he had it now, and ran back up the block toward the safety of a cellar. Let her scream, he thought. Someone was running toward him down the street. Angel, he thought, then saw his mistake. It was a man. He must have appeared out of nowhere. Stunned, Chico stopped. Behind him he heard the woman screaming; saw the man closing in. Chico didn't know what to do, he couldn't go back. He began to run again, intending to dodge the man, and just then help came. Angel appeared behind the man; with a blow of his fist he sent him sprawling, then he and Chico ran for the cellar they always used and escaped by way of another cellar into the next street, only to see a police car turn the corner as they came up to the sidewalk.

The police car stopped. Chico and Angel stopped, then turned and ran back into the cellar. Chico was still holding the pocketbook; he made for the roof, Angel ahead of him. When they reached the first landing inside the hall, a door slammed below. The cops had got in. Heavy steps pounded the stairs. Angel hit the roof first, almost a flight ahead of Chico, who was gasping. The footsteps on the stairs below thundered in his ears and he felt he would never make the roof but he did, then knew he couldn't run any more. His heart was pounding, Angel had gone in the darkness, and he

couldn't go it, knew he couldn't now. He jumped for the skylight above the roof landing, swung himself up, and lay flat.

A moment later the roof door slammed open. Their guns drawn, two policemen stepped out on the roof. Chico was breathing hard, he could feel his heart pounding and tried to stop from breathing lest they hear him. He could see them now, heard one say, "You go that way, I'll go this way. We'll get one of the bastards." He saw them each move toward a different roof doorway, their flashlights sifting the splintered rain, watched them disappear and waited, still afraid to breathe and afraid the furious pounding of his heart would give him away. No more voices now, no flashlights, only the dark and the cold rain falling. He lay still, feeling better, but his breath came hard, in great painful gasps. The pocketbook was under his jacket. The rain was falling in torrents; he wondered whether he should come down from the skylight or wait. "Maybe it's a trap," he told himself and lay there, feeling himself growing cold.

Then he heard a familiar whistle. Angel had safely made the street below, escaped the police and run up four flights in the house across the way where he lived. From his window he could see the opposite roof, a story lower, and spot the cops in the street. But they had finally gone and now he whistled, called across then, telling Chico to come down, that the Law had gone.

Chico slid from the skylight and pulled out the pocketbook. "I'm going to throw it," he said.

"You crazy?" Angel asked. "You can't reach."

"I'm going to try," Chico said. He had no intention of carrying it down the stairs with him. Searching the roof, he found a stone, and in the hallway of the house a bag among some garbage. By the time he came out on the roof again, Angel was waiting on the roof across the street. "It's got to reach or it's all for nothing," Chico told himself, then flung the pocketbook, which was weighted by the stone. Flung it and watched it scale away, strike the side of the house, across the way and fall. His heart fell with it. It didn't go all the way down but landed on the fire escape and, quick as a cat, Angel started after it.

Breathing easier, Chico turned and moved toward the roof door, then went down the stairs, walking lightly. The house held an abnormal quiet, but on one landing a door moved

slightly ajar, part of a face appeared and one peering eye. Chico moved easily, ignored the watcher and went down the rest of the way to the door and stepped outside. An ill-timed exit, though, for the police had come back, the patrol car moving slowly toward him, headlights blazing. It was too late to step back. He knew he had to brazen it out and stood there, tense, watching the rain beating in front of the lights, the wind blowing and the rain falling slantwise. He had to close his eyes then, for the cops turned on the spotlight and flashed it at the doorways of the houses. As it flashed off he opened his eyes, then saw it flash on again and move toward him. The light caught him in its blinding glare and he felt the bones of his knees start to crumble. Even if he had wanted to, he couldn't have run. He stood there with his eyes closed again, and heard one of the cops say, "Is this one of the bastards?" The light went off and a woman answered: "I can't see him too good. Shine the light on him."

"Hey, you, come here!" It was the cop's voice again, and Chico obeyed, really frightened now and barely able to walk to the car. His legs were dissolving under him but he reached the car to hear the same voice again, the same question: "Is this one of the bastards?"

Chico saw the woman now, tears were running from her eyes but she managed to stare at him. "No, no, I'm not too sure. All I want is my credentials and the keys to my apartment. There wasn't much money in the pocketbook." Chico eyed the cops. They were looking him over and seemed angry, wanted to get their hands on him but there wasn't much they could do. As the car moved away, he felt some of the tension leave him but he was still frightened and followed the car with his eyes till it turned the corner. Angel was standing in a doorway across the street. As he made his way toward Angel, he kept thinking: He'll be laughing if it's a lot we got.

"How much did we get out of that job?" he asked.

"Man, there's only ten dollars in it," Angel said. A look of suspicion crossed Chico's face, and he added: "You don't think I'd clip you, do you?"

"I don't think so," Chico said, but a doubt remained in his mind for a moment, then left him. "Get rid of the pocketbook," he advised. "Throw it out the back window."

Angel went into the house and, at the back of the hallway,

flung the pocketbook out a window. When he came back Chico was breathing hard and spitting.

"You go get the stuff," Chico said. "I'll wait upstairs. Man, I'm all soaking wet and beat."

Angel left then and Chico climbed the stairs to the room Angel had just off the hallway. The door was unlocked and he walked in. He heard voices in another part of the house. They subsided as he closed the door. Angel's mother called. "Is that you, Angel?"

"It's me, Chico."

"Oh."

A moment later the voices started up again, and Chico reached up and put the light on. He took off his jacket, dropped it on a chair, and walked to the kitchen. The family was in the living room, the light out in the kitchen. He didn't bother to put it on but helped himself to some matches, filled two glasses with water, and went back to the room. He set the glasses on the dresser and dropped on the bed to wait for Angel.

A little later footsteps sounded on the stairs. They came on up, crossed the landing, and Angel stepped into the room. Chico was sitting up again, feeling better.

"You got the stuff?" he asked.

"Yeah, I bought us a sixteenth in a package."

"That's good! God, that's real! Who did you cop from?"

"Domingo—in the poolroom."

"That's some all right stuff then," Chico said, and got off the bed feeling both elated and depressed, wondering if he could get a quick hit. He took the package from Angel, kicked his shoes off and stood soaking wet and chilled in his clothes. Then he spilled some of the drug in the spoon, took his measure of it when it was cooked and waited for Angel to load his syringe.

Both shot up together, then Chico changed his clothes. He put on some of Angel's and felt better now, not too high, and his sickness was leaving him. Sitting on the bed again and smoking a cigarette, he looked at Angel, and Angel said, "Man, why didn't you come across the street when you spotted that squad car?"

"Yeah, why didn't I? Cause them cops'd be sure it was me then. Man, I was real scared on that skylight, I seen everything

that was going on. And that lady in the squad car, you know what she said? She wanted her keys and credentials."

"She'll never get that stuff again. Man, you want to go down and pull another?"

"No, let's cool it for a while. They're still riding around with the lady."

They sat there then, just talking. It was still raining, Chico could hear it beating against the window. Finally when the rain stopped, they got up and went down to the street. Chico was thinking of the drug they'd left upstairs. "We ought to go back and take that other shot," he told himself. At the candy store they bought cigarettes and sat around, unable to make up their minds whether to pull another job or call it a night.

Finally Chico said, "Let's call it, man. Let's go back up and take them shots."

"Yeah, it's still raining and probably everybody's gone on home," Angel said. He looked relieved, so did Chico, who had been waiting to go back to the room. They walked out of the candy store and down the empty street. The rain fell tiredly now, without sound, an air of desolation hung over the city, an early silence, pronounced and morbid. Chico and Angel were unaware, both thinking of the white dream-stuff up in the room. "Is it going to get me high, or be like the last shot?" Chico asked himself as they reached the house. They climbed the stairs to the room, where Chico took off the borrowed jacket and flopped on the bed.

"What do we do for bread tomorrow?" he said.

"We could go downtown and get some coats to pawn," Angel suggested, and that was settled.

They got ready to take off again, and Angel cooked the drug, gave it too much flame and overheated it so that when Chico took his shot he felt it through his body. He was in a hurry, greedy for it and it hit him right off, as soon as he shot it in the main. Angel was just as anxious but he had trouble with the needle, couldn't get a hit, so Chico helped him, tightening the belt around his arm, making the veins come out. Angel got his hit then and sat back.

"What about tomorrow?" Chico said again. "What time do we meet?"

"About eleven. No, let's make it before that."

"Ten o'clock then," Chico said, and felt himself getting

sleepy. The drug was making him itch, too, he felt it burning in his blood, and kept rubbing his face with one hand. The cigarette he'd lit and which was forgotten in his other hand meanwhile burned a hole in his trousers. He was half asleep when he heard Angel's voice: "Man, you better wake up, you're burning yourself."

With that he came to with a start. "Man, I was nodding. Let's go down and catch some fresh air."

Angel yawned and stood up. For a moment he listened to the others in the house, then went to the door. Chico followed and they descended the stairs again, walked to a dark street and stood in a doorway. It was still raining, but the rain didn't matter. They were feeling good now, relieved, talking. A drunk came by, sopping wet and staggering. They eyed him and it looked too easy to let go, a setup. They exchanged glances, and Angel said, "I'm going to work him."

"Go ahead, I'll wait," Chico said.

Angel stepped out into the rain.

In back of the candy store they examined the loot. The two rings they'd gotten might bring fifteen dollars each, the watch twenty-five dollars. Chico slipped the watch on his wrist and they went looking for Domingo, the pusher, to see if he would want it. A block away, they walked into a crowded poolroom. Domingo was there. Angel signaled to him and he came over.

"I got something to show so let's go some place private."

The three of them walked out of the poolroom, and entered a hallway next door. Chico took the rings out, displayed the watch on his wrist and said, "How much will you give for this?"

"A sixteenth for the watch, and nothing for the rings."

The deal was closed, the watch taken, the drug given in return. Chico put the rings back in his pocket, and they moved out of the hallway. Domingo returned to the poolroom, and they started back toward Angel's house. Neither one spoke. It was late now, and Chico thought, Where can I get these rings off? For no pawnshop was open. When he mentioned this, Angel said, "Let's talk about tomorrow."

"What about tomorrow?"

"Are you still down for it?"

"I'm down for it."

"Okay, it's ten o'clock."

They shot up in Angel's room and finally Chico changed his clothes and left. Downstairs he found it was still raining, the streets desolate; only cats were about, searching the garbage pails, and they frightened him; he heard one, it sounded like a baby crying and set him walking faster until he reached the hallway of the house where he lived.

Once inside, he went straight to his room, real high now, and took off his clothes and sat on the side of the bed. That way he nodded off, slept, then dreamed that something was chasing him. He could not see what it was, tried, looked back, then fell through a horrible clinging darkness. Fear made him cry out, and suddenly he woke, jumped to his feet and looked around. The light in the room was still burning, there was no sound, no one came to his room. The cry which had come from his lips was part of the dream and not real. He knew that now and reached for the light-cord, plunging the room into darkness.

chapter 3

TEN O'CLOCK the next morning it started all over again. Angel got him out of bed, and they shot up the rest of the stuff, then went off to a pawnshop to get rid of the rings and the overcoat. They had money now; they went to the poolroom but Domingo wasn't there and they had to get the drug from another pusher. Then they went up to Angel's room and shot up once more and this time got real high. After that, Chico didn't feel like going downtown, preferring to sit and nod, but half an hour later he straightened out and thought of downtown again. That was all right with Angel. He was ready to go, and they started off, both high but knowing what they were after.

They went by subway but once they reached the department store Chico called a taxi and told the driver to wait. Angel walked into the store. Ten minutes later he came running out, carrying an enormous box. The taxi driver saw him and a look of fear froze his face, but Chico said, "Be cool. Just get us out of this jam and we'll get another taxi." In the next moment he

opened the door while Angel flung the box into the cab and jumped in, slamming the door behind him. A man came running out of the store, shouting, but the taxi was already moving. It shot out into the traffic, sped down the street and turned the corner to head uptown.

No one said anything. Chico and Angel sat on the edge of the seat and waited for something to happen, while the taxi driver, frightened out of his wits and ignoring traffic lights and laws, managed to take them where they wanted to go and left them off uptown, driving away so fast that he made them laugh—which relieved their own fears for the moment.

They were safe once they reached Angel's house. Angel opened the box. Chico stared at the coats and whistled.

"Ten ladies' coats at ten bucks apiece. You know what that means?" Angel said. "We're in business. We can start pushing junk for ourselves now."

"Man, we're kings. We don't have to sweat for it any more. With the profits we can be high all the time. I can see us in a big blue Cadillac, the biggest pushers around this turf."

They laughed, slapped each other on the back. It was great, wonderful, the dream come true. But this had happened before. They had gone into business to "feed" their habits, just as other addicts had done, and each time something happened. They blew their tops, became greedy, and ended by shooting it all up themselves. This time, though, they were going to do it right.

"We got to do it cool this time," Angel said seriously. "We ain't going to be hogs."

Chico nodded. "Solid, man. We got to think of ourselves. That's the only way, the cool way."

They laughed again.

When the coats were sold, they took the money and, adding the money from the ring, they bought a load and shot up again to celebrate. That was the beginning, and the end too; that was how it started all over again. Just having the stuff was too much for them. It was easier to dream about pushing and being big dealers, easier to dream about anything. More and more this had come to be so with everything; dreams replaced reality, dreams were better and more satisfying. This time they bought both heroin and cocaine, combined the two drugs, shot it up and, once started, kept it up all day. Not that they needed to but they were greedy.

The second day was worse. Others came down the cellar for a free fix, or promised to pay for the stuff at a later, phantom date. And the two businessmen forgot their promises, too blind to know or care, and only found out later when there was nothing left but their need for more.

An argument separated them, each blaming the other for what had happened. Chico started for home, and Angel prowled the streets. No one was home when Chico got there. He expected no one, yet the empty rooms sent him back to the streets again, needing the drug if only to forget what had happened. He was afraid to pull a job now that he was on his own, believing he would be caught. Of late he'd been haunted by this fear and would think about it before sleep and when sick for the drug. It would happen on an easy thing, he told himself, like breaking into a car.

There was a dull pain in his stomach when he walked into Peewee, a huge colored fellow celebrated for his tremendous strength, respected for his temper and the amount of drugs his body could absorb. A mugger who didn't know his own strength, Peewee was dangerous to work with. He'd killed a man, mugging him. Rumor had it that he'd killed more than once. Now he grabbed Chico by the shoulders.

"Man, just the one we need. Are you with us?" he said.

Chico glanced aside, for Jackie was standing beside Peewee. The guy he hated. But the question was a challenge, and more than that—a chance to get some money again. Chico looked at Peewee and knew he was sick, in need of a jolt.

"You with us?" Peewee asked again, a look of desperation in his eyes. "We need another stud to set this up. It's an easy take, unless you're afraid."

"Of what?" Chico said.

"It's a house-job and nobody's home."

"Yeah, how do you know nobody's home?"

"I made 'sure, but if you want to punk out, say so."

"Count me in," Chico answered.

"Solid, man!" Peewee laughed and slammed him across the back with the flat of his hand. "It's easy," he said, "a real push-over, this one."

"Yeah," said Jackie, and he smiled at Chico. Chico ignored him. Anyone else would have suited. I'd trust a flatfoot first, he thought, but it was too late to change his mind.

As Peewee had said, it was an easy take. Two could have

pulled the job, or one smart stud, Chico told himself. But it didn't matter now. They had the loot, bought the H and headed for the landing to Peewee's roof, jammed the roof door and prepared to take the drug. Placing two packages of H beside Chico, Peewee went down for water and came back running, a smile on his face, then stopped suddenly and looked down where he had left the packages.

"Where's that other package?" he asked. "Where'd it go?" There was a wild look in his eyes now. Chico saw it and was frightened. Jackie's got it, he thought. Got it in his pocket. But he was closest, and Peewee was staring at him.

"I don't know nothing about it," Chico said.

Jackie remained silent, only paled. Greed had made him take the chance, and he was frightened now, but Peewee didn't look at him. He was still staring at Chico, sick and shaking now, murder in his eyes when he said, "You were closest. I put them packages next to you, you mother-jumping thief!"

"I don't know what happened. Honest, I don't," Chico said, and glanced past Peewee down the stairs. He was trapped and knew it.

Peewee hesitated. His eyes went to Chico, back to Jackie, small now and full of hate. "Well, one of you's got it," he said, paused, then went on: "And you was closest, I believe you got it."

He leaned toward Chico again, who tried to move back, but there was no escaping the two great paws. In a moment he was yanked to his feet so fast that his teeth clicked together. He was shaken like a puppet, heard his jacket rip and the words of protest in his head clatter out in a senseless idiom.

"You got it and I'm going to throw you off the roof if you have," Peewee threatened, then lifted him like a feather, kicked the roof door open and started for the parapet.

Jackie followed, knowing now that Peewee would carry out his threat. "Cool it, man," he shouted, "I got that package!"

Dropping Chico like a bundle of rags, Peewee whirled around. "You got it?" he said slowly.

"Yeah, I was just kidding around. It was meant to be a joke." As he spoke he backed slowly away toward the roof door and Peewee came toward him.

"Yeah, a joke. Some joke," Peewee said, and closed in on Jackie, then with one blow slammed him against the roof door. As Jackie fell Peewee kicked him in the chest. "Now get," he

said, standing over him, "before I drop you off or do you in. Go on!"

Jackie stood up, holding his chest, thoroughly frightened; yet he didn't go, but begged for his share of the drug.

"You ain't getting nothing," Peewee said. "You're lucky your mama has a live boy yet. Now you going to go, or do somebody have to bury you?"

Turning to the door, Jackie opened it, slipped through, and ran down the stairs. As the sound of his steps died out, Peewee swung around and faced Chico, the wild look gone from his eyes.

"I'm sorry, man," he said, "but I don't like nobody fooling with my stuff."

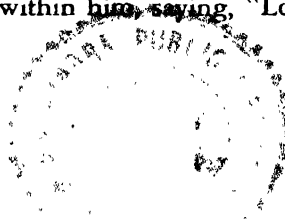
Still frightened but angry, too, Chico answered, "You mean our stuff. I was in on the deal, remember?"

"Yeah." Peewee moved toward the roof door now. "I'm waiting too long," he mumbled. "Let's get it cooked, man. Man, I'm going to die if I don't have it."

Saying nothing, Chico followed him onto the roof landing, closed the door, then turned and looked down the stairwell, listening. He saw no one, heard no one. The house was quiet. Asleep, it seemed, but only momentarily, for the hush that held it broke and a whispering started up. Chico imagined the others in the house then, everyone listening. An alertness and tension about the house itself made it seem to possess a life of its own, and this more than anything had its effect, stimulating his fear so that he wanted to flee, yet couldn't move, caught between the desire for the drug and the dread anxiety which came more frequently now and with greater intensity.

Finally he turned around. Peewee had cooked the stuff and was ready to take off. "Come on, man, nobody's coming," he said, and Chico filled his own syringe.

They shot up then and, still frightened, Chico left, going home to an empty house. High even before he reached the stoop, he had to face the endless, tiring step that went on up forever. He reached the door and, once inside, dropped in a chair, his fear of getting caught gone now, but he was facing himself for once and there was a new fear. Like a faint, painful voice it spoke within him, saying, "Look what I done to, myself."



When Chico awoke, the room appeared strange, for the light had grown dim and the day was ending. He listened now, and heard nothing. No one home but he knew that soon enough the family would arrive and he didn't care to face anyone. Didn't want to eat, either. "I ought to see China," he told himself, but knew he wasn't going to her house, not with the way he felt. She'd know and he didn't want her to know.

He ran into Angel on the street. Angel had forgotten the argument. Neither of them mentioned it but talked of what they had done during the day.

Angel said, "We were fools, wasting all that stuff. We just threw it away, and now look at us."

"Are you beat?" Chico asked.

"No, I had me a fix. You need something?"

"I got a few pills, but I'm saving them just in case."

"In case of what?"

"Well, I been thinking of kicking my habit. Being a junkie ain't nowhere."

Angel smiled. "But you know that saying. Once a junkie always a junkie."

"I ain't a junkie yet."

"No?"

"You heard me, I'm going to beat it."

"I heard that before, brother, but when it gets you it gets you."

"Yeah, but it ain't got me."

"Then if you ain't a junkie, what are you?"

Chico frowned. "I don't know," he said, seriously, "but it ain't got me. Is it got you?"

Angel smiled. "I say it ain't, but inside I know different. I say I'm in control but it don't figure out that way."

"Well, I can take it or leave it yet."

"Yeah, you going to leave it then?"

"What for?" Chico said, and they both laughed. Then they walked to Angel's house.

When Chico returned to his own house, no one was home yet and that was good, for he was still a little high and intended to nap on the couch. But no sooner had he stretched out when the front door opened, slammed shut again and heavy footsteps sounded in the kitchen. Chico closed his eyes

and a moment later his older brother, Paulie, entered the room, whistling.

"You got to make all that noise?" Chico asked, opening his eyes.

Paulie stopped whistling, and stared at him. "You trying to act grown-up all of a sudden?" he asked.

"I'm just saying."

"Well, don't say to me like that." Paulie lit a cigarette and again stared at Chico. "Where's everybody?" he asked.

"You seen anybody around?"

"Only you, and you ain't nothing."

There was a definite feeling of tension in the room now, but Paulie appeared calm and sat down, saying, "Where were you all day?"

"Right here," Chico snapped.

"Yeah, sitting on your can. Ever think of working?"

"Sometimes, but what's that to you? Did you work when you went to school?"

"This ain't schooltime. It's vacation."

"So I'm on vacation."

"Is that all you're on?"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"You know what I mean," Paulie answered, "so don't give me that bull-crap."

"You're talking Chinese."

"All right, I'll tell you," Paulie said. "You've been taking dope, horse, jive, anything you want to call it. You've been stoned dead."

Hearing this, Chico felt his heart sink but he jumped up from the couch pretending anger. "What mother-jumpers you been listening to?" he almost shouted.

"What's more, you're a little high right now," Paulie went on casually. "What did you do, shoot up just before I came in?"

At this point Chico broke, frightened, yet his anger got the better of him and he said, "Yeah, you can't talk. You were a junkie yourself once." And in the next moment regretted his words. Paulie sprang at him, grabbing his throat.

"Yeah, once," he said. "That's right, and that's just why you're going to stop before you get started."

The angry fingers that gripped Chico relented then, but a second later a series of sharp, stinging slaps almost took his

head off and brought tears to his eyes. Then Paulie stopped.

"You see, I know," he said. "Friends of yours told me. I've been out looking for you, too, and it's lucky I didn't catch up with you or you'd been beat flat to the gutter."

His hand against his face, Chico sat up again, listening. Paulie said, "Next time I find out I'm going to tell Ma." Chico cried out: "All right, I'll quit it but don't tell Ma. You can't do that."

"I ought to, but I won't this time. So stay away from it, cause I'll find out if you use it."

"Okay, I've quit it, I won't touch it again."

"Okay. But who sells it to you?"

"Some kitty. I don't know his name."

"His name wouldn't be Domingo, would it?"

"Might be. I don't know."

"And he hangs in the poolroom?"

"He might."

With a look of disgust Paulie turned away, leaving the room.

"I got to quit it," Chico told himself. "I got to."

He was thinking of his mother, how much it would hurt her if she found out. For her he would do it, and for China. But he'd said this before, made promises he failed to keep. Over and over again, but this time he knew he'd straighten out.

chapter 4

RICE AND BEANS for supper again. "Yeah, again," he said to himself. Always rice and beans, all his life. It seemed as if he'd been eating the stuff for a million years and he hated it now. That was why he had walked out of the house. But he didn't understand why he disliked the dish now when not so long ago his mother couldn't put enough on his plate. Everything was mixed up, crazy, the whole world cockeyed and, as he walked down the block and looked at the lighted tenement windows, he thought: They're all eating it, everyone on the block, every son of a bitch in the neighborhood. Yeah, rice and beans, rice

and beans, coming out of their ears, their noses. They'll die eating rice and beans and then be buried in it. He was angry at them, himself, at everything, and didn't quite know why. Confused because he was what he was, and they were what they were, his people, all these Puerto Ricans that crowded the neighborhood, bulging tenements from cellar to roof, all of them poor, miserable and trapped on a new island, in a smaller space, hemmed in by others who'd built invisible walls to keep them in.

Like rats, Chico thought. We live like rats, and what for? What did we do? We're good as anybody else. It's just we're poor. And he didn't want to be poor, for it was bad to be poor, to have nothing. And because he thought that only his own people were poor, he believed he hated them and wished to be someone else, to belong to that other, richer world beyond his own, to be anything but what he was. Yet he hated the others, at least thought he did, for they looked down on his own people. Made them dishwashers, bus boys, anything of a lowly order. And called them spiks, dirty spiks. But let anybody call him that. Pride, anger, hatred swelled within him and he looked around as if expecting someone to shout the word at him. He wanted it to happen, to vent his pent-up feeling against someone. But there was no one to challenge him, for this was his street, his neighborhood, a Puerto Rican neighborhood, densely populated, bursting at the seams with the weight of his people. And that gave him strength, a feeling of security now.

Yeah, at least we own this, he thought. It's our neighborhood, all Spanish now. Which was true, and he himself had witnessed the change, arriving along with thousands of others by plane, no, by magic carpet, from that warm tropic island, escaping its poverty to find a new kind in a huge city that swallowed them as ruthlessly as it had swallowed others before. A confusing alien city of high, cold buildings and amazing sights—one to which they responded with joy at first, then misery. For most had jumped from frying pan to fire, to find the flight of the magic carpet a nightmare without end. But the city was their own now, his and theirs, loved and hated, wanted and unwanted.

"Yeah, ours," he said to himself. "Ours as much as anyone else's. We're citizens, too." And for a moment he felt he belonged, felt this was true, but in another moment saw

through the illusion. For it wasn't theirs. Nothing was but dirt and poverty, dismal tenements, dark halls, broken stairs and the invisible iron bars of this newest ghetto that imprisoned them all and labeled them spiks.

Thinking this way, his anger stirred again and he wanted to vent it against something. But the city loomed, impregnable and too vast, an overwhelming giant. It seemed simpler to escape it, but there was no retreat except in the heart of the ghetto he didn't want. No way out at all.

I'll die eating rice and beans, he thought, and he heard from a window above the street the wild beat of a mamba, feeling it in his blood. Clapping hands, a rhythmic beat, over and over again that same beat till the clatter of the el train drowned it out. He turned the corner then and, heading for China's house, he met her coming toward him from the opposite direction.

"What's the matter with you?" he said, for China had tried to pass him on the street. Now she stood before him with her nose in the air. "Nothing's the matter with me," she answered coldly. "Maybe it's you."

"Me?" But he knew what she meant, for he'd been avoiding her, not that he meant to, but he didn't want her to know. She and his mother. He didn't want to hurt them. But he'd already hurt China. "I been busy," he started to say and she cut him off: "That's what you said the last time."

"Yeah, I did." He felt himself growing angry. "So what?"

"Well, I've been waiting for you. Every night I wait and you don't come."

"Why not get another boy friend then if you're bored?" he said, feeling certain of himself now. "Nobody asked you to wait."

"Do you want me to?"

"It's up to you," he said.

She began to run. He caught her in the vestibule and rammed her against the wall. "Go ahead, try it again," he warned, then saw tears in her eyes and loosened his grip on her shoulders. "I'm sorry, honest, I didn't mean to hurt you, China."

"You didn't?"

"No, I didn't, I'm sorry," he said, and truly was. A moment before he had meant to hurt her, wanted to bang her head against the wall but somehow managed to restrain himself. "It was because you ran away," he said, but that was only part

of it. He couldn't explain the true reason for his anger, didn't realize what it was himself. "So don't run away again," he went on. "Don't ever do that." With that said, he felt a need for her, felt she could help him, yet couldn't tell her what he'd been doing. The same feeling that he had with his mother, the need to tell and the fear of letting her know. For to tell her would be to lose her, no matter how well she would understand. He would lose her anyhow, he believed, because she was good and belonged to a world already beyond him. Even now in the dark vestibule she seemed far away, her silence frightening.

"Say something!" he said to break the spell. "Don't look at me like that."

"I can't help it," she answered. "It's because you're different."

"How?"

"I don't know, but you're not the same Chico any more."

He thought that she knew then, had found out, as his brother had, and felt panic inside him. "Who's been talking?" he asked. "What did you hear?"

"About what?"

"Don't play stupid. You been listening to things."

"But I haven't been out of the house," she protested. "Nobody said anything about you. I wouldn't let them."

"Or wouldn't tell me."

"I'd tell you anything and you know it, Chico." She smiled at him now, and he felt better, safe, but was suspicious yet. "Then what were you doing out?" he asked.

"I was on my way to the store."

"Oh."

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"Sure, I'll go along with you."

"Ne, wait upstairs. I'll be right back," she said, and when he hesitated she slipped away from him and opened the front door. "My mother's upstairs. Just knock. Please."

"Okay."

"Go up and wait. Don't go away."

"Don't worry, I won't go away." He watched her go out the door.

Three flights up he stopped at her door, patted his hair, tucked his shirt in and rubbed his shoes on his trouser legs. He wanted to make a good impression, but as he knocked he

wondered if China's mother would know when she saw him. For there were certain signs, a telltale look about his eyes.

"Yes? Who is it?" China's mother said from beyond the door.

"Me, Chico."

"Oh, Chico. Wait a minute."

The door opened and China's mother greeted him, asking him where he had been.

"Working," he answered, and couldn't look *ner* in the eyes

"Well, come on in. Sit down. China just went to the store for milk and eggs. Make yourself comfortable inside. I'm washing the dishes."

With an uneasy feeling he went into the living room and sat down, then began to relax when he heard quick footsteps on the stairs; China had come back. As she started for the living room, her mother called her. Chico, straining to listen, heard nothing but a murmuring. Finally China entered the living room.

"What did your mother just say to you?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing." She smiled as she said that and relieved him. Then she sat beside him on the couch.

"Closer," he said, and put his arm around her and drew her nearer, kissed her. She pushed away.

"Explain to me first," she said.

"I've been busy hustling," he said, feeling himself growing angry again.

"Hustling what?"

"Money."

"And you forgot about me."

"I wouldn't say that. I'm just a guy that don't like to see a chick every day in the week. I'm out of questions and answers, and I need money."

"What for?"

"For clothes. Nothing else. So don't sound me like that when you know them tramps in the streets don't mean nothing to me. I've been thinking about you. Thinking I'd like to stay here forever."

China didn't answer, and he watched her, bothered by her silence.

"Are you mad at me?"

"No."

"Good. Then put on some records." He didn't want to talk

any more, nor think. "Something slow and sweet so we can fish."

The music came on, and he took her in the close, tight embrace of the dance, but she didn't respond, holding herself away. He tightened his grip then, and with that she pushed him from her. "What's wrong?" he asked, shoving her so that she fell on the couch. "You tired of me already?"

"No."

"All right, get up and dance. You know how to dance fish, don't you?"

"Yes."

"So dance right," he said. She moved against him then, tightly, and gave herself to him as she closed her eyes.

chapter 5

TWO HOURS LATER Chico said good night to China, kissed her at the head of the stairs, and went down into the dim light. He knew she was watching and waved from below. When her door had closed, he felt cut off, and wanted to go back. But there was only the street and a dull ache in his stomach, a pain which he'd been fighting off.

I got to kick it, he thought. Sweat it out, that's all. It ain't got me. He was sure of that, all he had to do was hold on, not give in. The only way to do it, the hard way, but he could take it. He had it beat already, he believed, yet as he walked he had to assure himself over and over again while the dull ache inside him intensified. Once home, though, it would be easier. He could sleep it off.

As he reached his doorway, Angel stepped from the shadows. They faced each other like strangers, Angel searching his face suspiciously.

"Where have you been?" he finally asked.

"Seeing my chick."

"China?"

"Yeah."

Angel yawned. Girls didn't interest him except on occasion,

and this was not an occasion. Besides, he knew China as a good girl and good girls didn't fool with dope, the only thing that mattered to him now. He yawned again, this time deliberately, to hide his suspicions and the feeling that touched him, an odd kind of anger which somehow involved all three of them but was mainly directed at China. "You been up conning her for money for stuff?" he finally asked.

"Nay, man, not me. That's not my line."

"Then what's happening if you ain't conning her?"

"Nothing. I just went to see her," he said.

"You get in?"

"She ain't that kind."

"Yeah, I heard that before."

"And you're hearing it again," Chico said angrily. "I had to see her to help me kick my habit."

"You mean you were dumb enough to tell her you're on the stuff? Man, you're crazy. You can't trust no broad in the world."

"She don't know, I couldn't get to tell her but, if I did, she'd understand."

"Nobody understands a junkie but another junkie," Angel said, shaking his head solemnly. "Nobody can but another junkie."

A truth which Chico knew already, painful knowledge he'd come by through association in this dim, lost world of addiction with its ever-shrinking physical margins and expanding dimensions of dream and fantasy. But he didn't believe he belonged yet. He stood, instead, in a twilight zone, on the edge of a precipice from which he wanted to retreat. He could go back, he thought, not knowing he was already caught. Trapped that night, which now seemed so long ago, when he snorted the first cap of heroin just to see what it was like. Trapped now with his body aching for it and Angel blocking the doorway to escape. If he could get upstairs, I'd beat it, I'd sleep it away, he thought, and in that moment wanted to brush his friend aside and run up the stairs.

But Angel spoke and stopped him. "Man, I'm needing it," he said. "You want to get something?"

"I said I'm off it."

"Okay, so you're off it, but a little bit won't hurt. Just a taste. You can't kick it all at once anyhow when you got it in

your system. It's bad for you like that. You'll only go back on twice as hard. You got to bust it slowlike."

With the ache in his stomach, this was a kind of logic Chico found easy to accept. A little H wouldn't hurt. It would do him good, feeling as he did. Still, he hesitated, thinking of the promises he'd made, the long hours of abstaining and the accumulated pain. There was more to come, too, and that was what he feared most. If he could avoid the pain . . . but there was only one answer to that. "Let's get some stuff," he decided. "Hell, I'm in control."

They walked off toward the poolroom, oblivious to the sharp night-cries of the city and the jargon of wheels and voices that rose from the streets around, both of them lost already, one not caring and the other not knowing.

The poolroom was crowded as usual, all tables occupied, the air of the place layered with smoke, the players with their gaudy clothes and square-back haircuts intent on the game, their eyes like marbles of dark liquid glass. Domingo stood out from the rest. Conservatively dressed, he seemed alone, relaxed and yet watchful. As soon as Chico and Angel entered, he spotted them, put his cigarette to his lips and avoided their eyes. But they were coming toward him. He knew what they wanted. Steady customers, and he hated to lose the one but it was better to play it cool. He didn't accept Chico's proffered hand—the trick shake by which the money was exchanged for dope. Studiously he ignored it. "You better find somebody else cause I'm not your man no more. I'm not selling you." Dumbfounded, Chico stared at him and didn't understand. Domingo explained. "It's your brother. I don't want to buzz him, you understand. He don't want me to give you nothing and I ain't looking for trouble from him."

"But I won't tell him," Chico protested.

"I know, but other people will." Domingo allowed the smoke from his cigarette to pour from his nostrils and looked away.

"Then you don't get my business, either," Angel said. "We got other connections."

"That's okay by me," Domingo answered unruffled. The stuff was spreading like wildfire through the neighborhood, and business was booming.

Outside the poolroom Chico turned on Angel. "Who's the other connection? Who do we cop from now?"

"I know this girl. She's got a pad. I ain't been there but I heard it's all right."

"Is her stuff good?"

"That's what they say. I ain't been there myself."

"Will she give us a free fix?"

"When you're new, but after the first time you buy it."

"That's all right. Lead me to it."

Ten minutes later they arrived at the house they were looking for, mounted the stairs, knocked on the door.

"Who's that?" someone asked.

"Me," Angel answered.

The door was opened by a thin girl with a sallow face and expressionless eyes.

"What'll you have?" the girl asked.

"What have you got?" said Chico.

"Pot, H, morphine, and that's all," the girl recited in a toneless voice.

"Give us a shot of H."

"For free, cause you know this is the first time," Angel added. "We want to know if it's good."

The girl turned to a table in the center of the room on which stood a bowl. With a spoon she picked up some H.

"Go get some water," Chico said to Angel.

"No, man, you go get it," Angel answered, and Chico realized then that Angel thought he was going to try to beat him. He went to the kitchen and, coming back, put the glass on the table. Angel drew up some water in his syringe, put the drug in the spoon and cooked it. "I'll hit up first," he said and, when Chico agreed, he drew up from the spoon. They were to split the hot, but Chico was watching carefully and, when it appeared that Angel had taken more than his share, he protested. "That ain't half, put back some of that jive," he said.

"No, man, that's half."

"Put it back!"

Reluctantly, Angel gave back two drops.

"More. Come on, two more."

"I'll put one, that's all, just one. That'll even it."

"Skip it!"

Angel hit himself in the arm but didn't catch the vein. "God-damn!"

"What happened?"

"What do you think?" Angel removed the belt from his arm, tried again and missed.

"All right, let me hit you." Chico took the works and tried to hit him, but the paper that was used to keep the needle steady had loosened and the drug shot out the sides and squirted over Angel's arm.

"Now look what you did!" Angel moaned. "You lost it!"

"Man, I'm sorry. You know that can happen," Chico said. Angel stared at him, sick and ready to cry. He felt sorry for him, then, and gave him part of his own share from the spoon, hit him, then took care of himself.

Angel turned to the girl. "Hey, babe, can we get a shot?" he asked.

"If you pay for it," the girl answered solemnly. "I don't know you good enough to lend you."

"But we goofed our stuff!" Angel's eyes and nose were running and his spine ached. "You saw we goofed it!"

"I can't do it."

"But we're good for it."

"All right, I'll give you a half." She left the room and came back with two bags. When it was in the spoon and cooked, Angel prepared to draw it up in the syringe again but Chico protested.

"Look, you hit first the first time," he said. "Let me go."

"No, man, I goofed my shot."

"Hey, give me a break."

"All right, go ahead." Angel gave up reluctantly, and Chico drew up the stuff, hit himself, catching himself right off. Angel stared at him.

"How'd you catch yourself so fast?" he asked.

"Me, I know how to hit myself."

"Yeah, I know, too."

"Well, maybe your veins are rolling."

"No, man, I know exactly how to hit. I don't know what's wrong."

Meanwhile Chico was kicking. He kicked four times, drawing his blood up into the syringe and mixing it with the drug.

"Come on, man. Come on, man," Angel pleaded as he watched.

"Wait a minute, just one more," Chico answered, then kicked again and felt himself getting high. "Man, this drug's good!" he said.

'Hurry up!

Chico tried to shoot the drug into his arm then, saw it refusing to flow and drew the spike from his arm to clear it with a piece of fine wire.

"Come on, man, you're high already," Angel protested.

"Wait, one more try," Chico answered, and dropped the works. The needle hit the floor. Angel grabbed it, held it up.

"Look, you goofed the spike!"

"Man, I'm sorry." Chico began to scratch himself and now, then watched Angel as he blew on the needle. By the sound it made he knew it wasn't clogged. Angel knew it, too, but the drug left in the spoon for him was rapidly dissolving. There was only a little left and when he looked at it, he cried, "My stuff is gone!"

"Well, I can't help that," said Chico. Angel almost leaped at him. He backed away, saying, "What's the matter, you blowing your top?"

"Yeah, you goofed my stuff and you know I got a long habit."

"So have I. I'm blind in my mind. But you, got a half, man, you'll get a buzz off it."

"Yeah, but I want to get high." Angel drew up the heroin remaining in the spoon, hit and caught the vein, then kicked six times.

"All right, come on," Chico said.

"Wait." Angel kicked again, and the spike clogged.

"Let's have it!"

"Nothing doing, it's clogged."

"Man, clean it out then."

Angel tried with the wire but couldn't clear the needle.

"Man, we'll have to snort it now," he said hopelessly.

Chico took the works from him and went to the bathroom. Turning the hot water on in the sink, he cleared the needle, holding it under the tap, while the water, rushing boiling hot from the pipe, burned his hands.

•High now, Chico opened the door. As he started out he smelled the odor, noticed the dirt, filth, cobwebs, the dim greasy bulb, and the reeking bathtub where someone had thrown his guts up. He stared at all this without revulsion, it didn't touch him.

But in the other room, he found himself a seat on the couch, lit a cigarette and began to nod, forgetting everything. Minutes

later he felt something hot against his leg and jumped up. The couch was burning. The cigarette had slipped from his fingers, fired it and eaten a hole in the dirty fabric. For a moment he stared at the black growing scar with its edge of dull fire, then ran to the kitchen, told the girl what had happened, and followed her back to the room to watch her throw a pot of water on the couch.

The girl turned on him angrily. "You goofed off. Get out, and don't come back!" she said.

The sharpness of her voice annoyed him but he wanted no trouble and tried to placate her. "Don't be like that. You'd do the same. Yeah, look at all them other burns in it. That's a dirty, beat-up couch anyway and it ain't worth nothing."

"Get out!" the girl said, her voice softer now, but she meant what she said.

Back at the poolroom, they found chairs and began to nod off. A hand fell on Chico's shoulder, startling him into wakefulness and raising his anger.

"Man, what's happening?" Tito asked.

"Don't screw up like that! You know better," Chico said and withheld his fist. The flame of his anger was dying again, he only wanted peace. Sitting down once more, he began to nod. Tito said, "Come on, how about a game?"

"No, I'm too high, I can't see the table."

"Afraid you'll get taken?"

"Not by you, Jack." Chico felt that no one could take him, not at pool or anything else, for he was all-powerful now, all-conquering; a thousand skills were his, devices, tricks, a new, keen intelligence allowing his mind to see through everything, solve all riddles, simplify complexities. The drug did that, and kept him going back to it. The confusion of the days, the barriers and walls, were non-existent now, he walked right through them and assembled the jigsaw puzzle of life with a flick of his hand like a professional magician. Yes, all things were solved, all doubts fled, all questions answered. No fears existed, for he was master of all and there was nothing he didn't know or couldn't conquer. A wonderful feeling, giving him strength and confidence, and yet it was all a lie, an illusion which would shatter as soon as he came down from his high. But he believed in it now, lived it, for it was real to him; he refused to see the truth of what was happening

to him, for all that he believed was exactly the opposite in life. He was all-powerful, all-conquering, but even a game of pool would have been too much for him. Deep inside himself he knew this and refused Tito when he challenged him again. Then he turned to Angel, who was nodding beside him.

"Got to go home," he said. "This ain't nowhere." For one thing, there was too much noise and he didn't want to be bothered by any other junkie looking for a partner. It was better to leave, though he no more wished to walk or expend any effort than to jump in front of a subway train.

"You quitting so soon?" Angel asked.

"What do you mean, so soon?"

"Never mind." Angel yawned and turned away. As simple as this question seemed, complications threatened and he wanted none, wanted nothing now but the immense dark faceless universe, gift of the drug, the utter blankness which resembled sleep, deep dreamless sleep, death's complete repose, or that other life where the resident foetus neither thinks or dreams in the dark warmth of the protective womb. This was Angel's peculiar way of escape, by closing the hatches of his mind completely.

Chico stared at him and saw he was already nodding, his mouth agape, head dropping forward. "I'll see you tomorrow," he mumbled and made his way through the pool-room. Lights were blurred now, faces anonymous or distorted; everything appeared distorted, but what disturbed him was the voices around him. Growing louder by the moment, words and phrases rattled in his head, repeating themselves inanely. Worst of all was the sound of the billiard balls that seemed to crash together inside his brain. After what seemed ages, he reached the door and stepped out into the street.

Home seemed suddenly far away and he felt he would never reach it. It was far, far away, and long, long ago that he'd been there. Since last he'd walked through the doorway of his house, time had stopped. Now he was only aware of the street and the fact that he had to reach home.

At last he reached the house, the dim hall, and faced the stairs which he dreaded. This was the real test and the beginning of an awful journey. Step by step he began the climb; his head hanging, eyes half-closed. I'll never reach it, he thought, never reach it. In front of his own door he made,

an effort to straighten up, then walked in. His mother was waiting for him.

Sitting in a chair with a look of concern on her face, she stared at him. "Where are you coming from?" she said.

"I was at a party." He gave her an answer she was long familiar with and scratched himself without realizing it.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing. There ain't nothing the matter," he said, and knew he had made a mistake. But she didn't know, she had no idea of what was wrong. Still, she was looking at him the same way that China had and he feared her curiosity. To escape, he made for the kitchen but even before he could reach the sink he threw up. Grabbing the mop, he tried to cover himself but his mother suddenly appeared at the kitchen doorway.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I spilled water."

"But that isn't water."

"Well, I'm sick," he said. Now that he was cornered he was angry, frightened too. But she didn't understand. He could tell by her face, the look of concern.

"Well, you go to bed and stay in tomorrow," she said. Gently she took the mop from him and began to clean the floor while he walked toward the bedroom.

chapter 6

MORNING AGAIN, nine o'clock, the house quiet, and everyone gone off to work. He listened to make sure and the dead silence told him he was right. He turned to the wall and tried to go back to sleep but couldn't keep his eyes closed. He was sick again and had to get up.

He remembered the money he'd had from the night before. That gave him a feeling of safety. As long as I got money, he thought. But what pocket was it in? Panic struck him and he grabbed his trousers, pulled the pockets inside out, working feverishly and frightened now. Hell, it was on the floor.

Crumpled together, precious green bills that he'd worked hard for. He smiled to himself as he snatched them up; he counted them and discovered there were only three. Only three? Damn, there'd been more, he was certain of that, yet didn't know the exact amount. Perhaps he'd dropped some bills, but where? He began to search the room, his bed, his pockets again, then places in the room where he might have concealed the money, though he had no memory of anything but falling in bed the night before. A last hope sent him to the kitchen. It might be lying on the floor but, of course, it wasn't.

He hadn't lost it. He was certain of that. Someone had taken him. He thought of the girl who'd sold him the stuff last evening. Had she taken it? Or Angel? Even Angel was suspect now. When they split the money, he could have done it with a little sleight of hand. But there was no way of knowing, for he hadn't counted the money at the time, only grabbed it and shoved it in his pocket. His own greed had done him in, he told himself. He decided to watch Angel more closely in the future. "All I want to do is catch him trying to beat me and something's going to happen," he said aloud. "He'll pay through the nose then."

In all probability, though, he himself had lost it through carelessness. He knew that, too, and his suspicions concerning Angel faded quickly, like the promises he'd made the day before. Promises which he found convenient to forget at the moment, for he knew he couldn't hold to them the way he felt now.

Still, he decided to eat instead of going out to hustle up some money. Had to eat if only to hold himself together, for he was losing too much weight. He dressed and sat down at the table, to an egg, bread and coffee, then smoked a cigarette. Suddenly he got up and ran to the bathroom, where he threw up everything he'd eaten.

He knew he was sick now and that this was going to be a hard day, one he wasn't sure he could face. And because he felt guilty for what he had done last night after his promises, he couldn't stay in the house with himself. It was impossible. Yet he knew if he went out, that he would start all over again. He was beginning to realize that he couldn't stop himself, that this weakness was not to be overcome. There was one chance, to go to his grandmother's house. There he might hold off for a while. He made up his mind to go, then suddenly

decided not to, knowing he couldn't sit still for more than a minute.

"Some other time," he told himself. It was money he needed and more stuff, but it was too early to get anything in the usual way. With his hand on the doorknob he looked back and thought of the clothes in his closet. Not much left of his wardrobe. He'd pawned one coat and other items he'd been so proud of, but now nothing mattered but the desire for the drug. Still, he hesitated; already his mother had questioned him about his missing clothes and he knew she was suspicious. Yet he thought he could deceive her again. He went back to his room and took another coat from the closet. Once his hands grasped it, he turned and ran from the house, down the stairs into the street. It was crowded now and he avoided the eyes of everyone, for it seemed that they knew what he was about to do with the coat.

Four blocks away he entered a pawnshop and a baldheaded man looked up appraisingly. He knew, too. No matter what the expression on his face. It seemed to Chico that the man had been waiting for him. He tossed the coat across the counter.

"How much do you want for it?" the pawnbroker asked.

"Give me three."

The pawnbroker nodded and answered bluntly, "I can only give you two. It's worn and there's a mothhole." His finger pointed, then withdrew. He waited, watching Chico, knowing he could offer him what he wished because of Chico's need. That made Chico angry. "Okay, never mind!" he said. He grabbed the coat and left.

Two blocks up the avenue there was another pawnshop and he hurried toward it. The same thing happened again, the cold swift appraisal of the coat flung on the counter and the eyes that looked at him which said, "You're a junkie, so you'll take what I give you." Because Chico knew there was nothing else to do he took the money, signed his name and walked out.

With money to carry him, he felt like a new person. He didn't have to worry where the next shot was coming from and wasn't going to be sick. Even the threat of sickness was gone. Now he was on the upward climb and yet, for a brief instant, he had seen the trap in which he was caught, the invisible wheel on which he climbed and fell, carried down-

ward by the weight of his own act. Money gave him safety and a feeling of relief, but underneath lay the dread of the moment when his luck might fail, leaving him sick and without the money to buy the drug. And this fear was compounded, for he did not know what he might do in his desperation to obtain it.

Out of sheer terror his mind turned back to the present—none of this mattered now, none of it existed. He would not allow it to come to the surface. All he wanted was to get high again, and he could with the money he had. But not alone. He thought of Angel then, and wondered where he was. At the house? Did he have to start hunting him down again? Hesitating, he thought it over. Yes, they were still buddies, but thinking about last night again he wondered if Angel had beaten him out of that money. It was something to think about. Angel was becoming greedy, like all the rest of them. His best pal.

Suddenly he laughed. Wasn't it all in the game, and didn't every junkie sooner or later beat someone, anyone? Wasn't that the way to get by, by being smarter and smoother than the next guy? The world worked that way, the suckers made for the wise boys. And because he believed he was one of the wise ones he laughed and sought out his pal again.

But Angel wasn't to be found at his usual haunts. He was not in his room, in the pool parlor, nor anywhere in the neighborhood. No one had seen him, either. Not Icepick, who was standing on the corner with a hungry look in his eyes.

"You can't keep up with that stud," Icepick said. "That guy has a mean habit. Hell, he might even get desperate enough to work again to get the stuff."

Chico laughed at the last remark, feeling good with money in his pocket, but he needed another dollar to get the drug. He asked Icepick, "You want to go on some stuff?"

"Yeah, but I only got a dollar."

"Well, I got the rest."

"Man, you're a good stud. I'll straighten you next time."

"Okay, but do you know where to cop? Domingo won't sell me."

"Yeah, there's the man on the scene," Icepick pointed down the block to the other corner on the opposite side of the street where a man lolled against the window of a restaurant.

"Hey, I don't know that kitty at all," Chico said.

"I do, so don't worry." Icepick crossed the gutter. As he approached the restaurant, the man straightened up and casually surveyed the street. Chico watched him and Icepick. Words and money were passed, then Icepick turned around and recrossed the gutter while the pusher strolled casually around the corner and disappeared.

"Where's the stuff?" Chico said.

"He'll be right back. He's going to get it."

"You sure?"

"He ain't going to beat us, man. Relax."

"He better not try." Chico lit a cigarette.

They waited, but the pusher didn't return, and Chico finally asked:

"Where's your man? He done me in, so you better give me my money."

"I ain't got it and I ain't in with him," Icepick protested. "Man, you think I'd try to beat you after you put up?"

"Show me where the kitty lives and I'll believe that jive."

"Okay, man, let's go. Let's kill that mother-jumper!" Icepick said.

He led the way to the house where the pusher lived, went up the stairs, knocked at a door. A voice beyond said, "Who's that?"

"Icepick. Is your brother in?"

"No, he left, man."

The door did not open and no more was said, but Chico believed his man was inside the house. Not that that helped with the door closed. He couldn't kick it down. He turned to the stairs and started down them, threatening to kill the pusher who'd beat him. On the sidewalk he turned to Icepick.

"Man, you better give me my five dollars cause I'm sick," he said. "You better think fast or I'm going to start on you."

Icepick saw that Chico meant it and wanted to run but was afraid to turn his back. "I ain't got it," he said.

With that, Chico grabbed him. There was no use talking it had gone beyond that. "You gave that guy my five and he swung us," he shouted, and let Icepick have it in the face with his fist.

Icepick backed away, no fight in him. "All right, man, here's your money!"

Chico grabbed it and cocked his fist again, saying, "Shut up

and get out of my face before I stretch you!" That was enough for Icepick. He turned on his heel and walked away.

Chico watched him go. He had a new problem—where to get the stuff, for he needed it in a hurry. He thought of the girl again whose couch he'd burned while goofing off the night before. She'd said she didn't want him back but in any country money talked. At least he could sound her to see how he stood. He headed straight for the girl's pad, hurried up the rickety stairs and stood in front of her door in the dead, motionless dust-specked light of the landing.

He knocked. Lightly, he thought, but his hand rapped the panel as if to splinter it. The hallway echoed the sound, until the silence of the house stifled it—an interval of pain and agony through which he waited and prayed. A secret shuffling beyond the door finally rewarded his breaking patience. The knob turned, the door opened a few inches, and a fraction of the same dead-pan face appeared.

"What do you want?" the girl asked.

"I want to cop something."

Silence. Chico expected the door to close and was ready to kick the lower panel in when the girl finally said, "All right, I'll give it to you—only because I need the money, otherwise I wouldn't sell you." The door swung wide open then. Once inside, Chico showed his money and got the stuff. But he didn't have the works and had to ask the girl to lend him hers.

"For a taste?" she said, and he agreed. He readied the drug, cooked it up and was just about to hit himself when a knock on the door shook him to his toes, a knock so loud that it could mean but one thing—the Law. He looked at the girl. She appeared calm enough, there was still no expression on her face, as if such visits were commonplace, expected in her life. She looked dead to Chico but was aware enough to whisper, "Unload that stuff," and walked toward the door. Chico sprang to life, flung everything out the window but the glass of water, and unrolled his sleeves.

Two men entered the room, the Law written all over them, entered as if they owned the earth and gave no explanation. They found nothing but a glass of water to hold them there. It looked innocent enough to rouse their suspicions. One of them wanted to know what Chico was doing here.

"Nothing," he answered.

"Well, what's the glass of water for?"

"I was going to drink it."

"Then drink it. Don't let us stop you."

Chico hesitated a moment, then lifted the glass of water in which he'd cleaned the works, hesitated again, and with a final quick movement, emptied it. To rid himself of the bitter taste he started for the bathroom but one of the bulls wanted to know where he thought he was going. "I got to spit," he answered, and was allowed to go. When he reached the bathroom, he turned to find the bull had followed him. There was nothing in the bathroom though. The bull even examined the toilet bowl, then followed Chico back to the living room. "Don't let me find you up here again or I'm going to take you in." Chico nodded.

As the door closed after them, he listened to their footsteps go down the stairs until the silence of the house crashed them. Then he turned to the girl once more and asked for a free fix.

"What do you mean?" she said. "Do you think I'm giving it away?"

"Well, I'm sick."

"So you got money, buy a fix."

"Look," he said, angry now, "I threw it out the window. I never got what I paid for."

The girl stared at him, the same lack of expression on her face. Yet afraid of him, and of what he might try because she knew he was sick, she relented, left the room and came back with a halt, cooked it up and hit herself while he watched. He was waiting anxiously but she took her time, as if dazed, then began to kick it, mixing her blood with the drug and watching the syringe with eyes that never blinked. She kept this up till he realized she was kick-happy.

"Come on," he urged. He felt himself growing angry.

"Wait," she said, "wait a minute," and went on till he thought she'd never stop and had to hold himself back from tearing the works away from her.

When his turn finally came he found the stuff all but dissolved from the spoon and cried, "It ain't nothing but cotton cause you had to kick your brains out!"

"I'll get more," she answered, for now she knew he had to have his. He'd do anything if she refused him. She got some more and watched him go through the ritual, halt-

nodding, her eyes grown small and her mind adrift already. Saw him hit himself quickly because he couldn't wait, finish and clean the works.

Chico turned to her. "I'll see you," he said, and was on his way down the stairs. When he reached the sidewalk he felt at ease for the first time that day. His mind seemed clear, sharp, and there were no burdens; the clamorous demands of the city, his family, life itself as he knew it and the confusions of this precarious state, this particular period, this precipice upon which he stood, unbalanced and uncertain of himself and his status—not a man yet and no longer a boy—all compounded uncertainties, secret and hidden fears were no longer his, obliterated with the drug. Now all he wanted to do was get home and nod. At the corner he walked into the pusher, if he was one, who had gone off earlier with his money and failed to return.

"Hey, where were you, man?" he said, ready to grab the fellow if he tried to run.

The pusher was startled but had a ready answer. "I didn't see you on the scene so I did it up myself," he explained.

"Okay, so you did it up, but where's my five dollars? I want it now." Chico grabbed him then.

"Get your hands off me. You ain't going to do nothing and you ain't going to get nothing. I'm high and you won't whip my ass," the pusher said, but that which gave impetus to his defiance loaned anger to Chico, two-fold anger because he'd been tricked. He slammed the pusher against the wall and would have battered him then, but the pusher suddenly realized what he was up against and made an offering. "Suppose I give you a bag?" he said. "That's all I got on me."

Chico hesitated, then agreed and accepted the bag. The pusher walked away, turned the corner and disappeared. Chico, suddenly suspicious, decided to taste the stuff to see if it were good. It wasn't, it tasted like flour. The pusher had beaten him again. Quickly, he turned the corner, started to run, then stopped, for his man was nowhere in sight. "Damn, next time I'll kill him!" he mumbled. He retraced his steps around the corner and stopped again. Down the block he saw the girl whose house he had come from. She was leaving the house between two men. They stopped at the curb before a car, talked a moment, then got into it and drove away.

"Yeah, where do I cop now?" Chico asked himself, for he knew what had happened. The Law had got the girl.

Angel was waiting for him at the foot of the stoop. "Man, you look high," Angel said. "Where'd you get it?"

"I got swung, too," Chico answered, ignoring the question.

"Yeah, how come?"

"Icepick said he knew a guy and I gave him the money to give to him and he blew."

"And you trusted Icepick? He'd sell his own mother—but that don't explain where you got the stuff."

"I went back to the broad's house and had a close one. The Law busted in and gave me a hard time but didn't find no jive. They wasn't trying too hard, but they came back later, after I hit the street. Bang, they got the girl. They been laying for her, and now we got no place to cop."

"No?" Angel smiled. "We got a new boy with good stuff."

"Yeah, how do you know it's good?"

"Well, I got some up the room. Want a taste?"

"God damn, don't stand there! Let's go!"

This day that had started out as a nightmare finally became a dream—and suddenly vanished. Heat rose from the summer streets and the sharp sounds of day splintered against each other, a softer hue and cry voiced itself with the descending dusk. The city was panting and moist but there was a note of joy as the shadows took it, and in Chico's neighborhood music filled the air, pouring from radios and victrolas through wide-flung windows, fast, rhythmic and seemingly all the same, with a wild frantic note in it. Chico heard it as he came from Angel's house—the frantic note which belonged to each song. From every window it poured, filling the street and inundating his heart, a wild music which carried underneath, like a subterranean stream, a theme of despair. It was the first time he'd heard it like this, caught the undertone and he didn't understand, any more than all the others listening. No one understood, for it belonged to the heart and could only be felt. Gone then, he caught the fast, gay beat as he entered his house and started up the stairs.

On the landing he stopped, listening intently. Beyond a door a victrola was spinning a black disc and the words of the

"Cuban Mamba" came clear to him—at least the one word which gave the song its name—*Mamba*—repeated over and over again till he felt it in his blood, felt pain, then unreasoning anger and wanted to kick the door down. "That stud must only own one record," he said to himself, "he's played it so often." The chanting of the singers followed him up the stairs till he closed the door against it.

It was after suppertime and his mother was waiting for him. She turned her head sharply as he entered the kitchen and wanted to know where he'd been.

"To the movies," he said.

"I thought you were sick."

"Well, I was but I'm all right now," he answered. Knowing what was coming next, that his mother would ask him to sit down and eat, he added, "I'm not so hungry. Don't bother to fix up anything for me."

He moved toward the living room and was stopped by an unexpected question: his mother wanted to know what he had done with his coat.

"I put it in the cleaners," he replied, and watched her eyes, wondering if she'd believe him. There was no way of knowing, for she dropped the subject as quickly as she'd brought it up.

Yet it was this that made him feel that she knew something and he almost wanted her to speak out—why, he didn't know, for he was afraid that she would. But deep inside himself he wanted her to know, wanted her help, yet couldn't tell her. His shame was too great, though she was the one who could help him most. Alone, he felt helpless, sensed that he was lost. Shame, guilt, fear—these were too much for him. He did not tell her. Never could. But he was haunted by the idea that she already suspected him and sooner or later would find out, just as, sooner or later, he felt he would be caught by the police. Twin fears that he lived with and couldn't escape; not even the drug allowed him that, for, as soon as he came down from each high, both feelings were there and day by day intensified. In spite of that he did not stop himself, for the urge to continue was greater than all fears, a ravenous driving force which sent him on and on toward a nebulous doom that lay waiting ahead in the shapeless future thundering toward him.

For the moment, though, he was safe and had no wish to

face his thoughts. All were unwanted now; he wished to bury them. By avoiding his mother, he could accomplish this. He turned toward the living room and pulled his handkerchief from his pocket. Something fluttered to the floor. For a second he ignored it, and apparently his mother didn't notice. She was talking, telling him he had to stay in tonight, and he was only half listening. The object which had dropped from his pocket caught his eye. It was the pawn ticket. A moment later, he put his foot on it and looked at his mother. Had she noticed? She gave no sign, was still talking, complaining of the hour he'd come home the night before and repeating that he couldn't go out.

"All right," he said at last, "I heard you!" He was still standing on the pawn ticket, for he could do nothing but wait, afraid that he couldn't retrieve it without being caught. "Why don't she go?" he said to himself. "Why don't she let me alone?"

His anger flared but it was a fire that raged inside him, for he couldn't do anything. He knew she was toying with him to see what he would do. Deliberately he took his foot off the ticket, bent down, picked it up, and walked into the living room, waiting for her to say something. When nothing happened, he smiled to himself. She didn't know. Dumb. Too dumb to know anything, he told himself. I could shoot up under her nose, then tell her a fairy story and she'd believe me. That's the trouble. Confused again, he didn't know how to deal with this, angry with his mother because of her ignorance, ready to blame her for his own deeds—yet relieved because she wasn't aware and hadn't caught him.

Turning the radio on now, he sat down, intending to stay in. He'd been overdoing it and that was foolish. He had to control it, keep himself in line. And he was doing that, wasn't he? He was always in control, always would be. It'd never get him, never make a real public out of him.

He sat back and closed his eyes, listening to the music. His mind went blank, the way he wanted it to be when he did not care to think of anything. It was better not to think, better to escape. And for a while he managed to escape the world. Then his back began to pain him, his nose ran and the ache in his stomach returned. It was coming back, it was only the beginning, but he knew he was going to be sick if he didn't

get the stuff. And here he was trapped in the house, not supposed to go out, threatened by the all-devouring need and stirred by an urge which was always stronger. God, if he didn't have it tonight, if he couldn't get it! He thought of the torture he'd have to go through, and wondered whether he could stand it. He felt he couldn't stand it, never hold out till morning. "I've got to get it," he told himself. Not later, but now. That way, he could avoid suspicion, his mother wouldn't know. All he had to do was say that he was going for a pack of cigarettes.

He stood up and went to the kitchen. His mother was sitting at the table and she looked up at him, a strange expression in her eyes.

"I'm going down for a pack of cigarettes, so don't get excited. I'll be right back," he said, expecting opposition, a warning at least. She stared at him without speaking. Certain now that she knew something, he waited, but her continued silence was too much and, at last, he moved toward the door. With his back to her he stopped, expecting her to say: "You junkie, so that's what you are. Are you going down to get some more?" But she didn't speak, and he opened the door, not looking back.

The landing was almost dark, the stairway shadowed. As he stood at the top step, he hesitated while he stared down. The darkness below him was threatening, something big waiting to grasp him—a horrible black pit. At last, he shivered and started down the steps. It seemed to him he was plunging toward Hell itself.

chapter 7

TWO DAYS LATER Chico told himself, "I'm going to cold turkey it. That's the hard way but the only way to bust my habit." He avoided Angel, slept late, and stayed in the house during the day. In the evening he went to see China.

But China was angry. At first he thought it was because he'd been seeing so little of her, which was partly true,

then he believed her friends had been talking about him, telling her he'd been using dope.

"Well, go ahead, say it," he said. "Say it. Tell me which bright girl friend of yours whispered in your ear."

"Nobody whispered in my ear."

"No, not much, and you take it all in."

"Well, what about Carmen?"

For the moment he didn't know what to say. Then laughed with relief because China hadn't said what he expected her to say.

"What's so funny about that?" China wanted to know.

"Hell, do you think she means anything to me?"

"Maybe."

"Well, she don't. I just happen to know her, that's all. What's more, I didn't see her in a long time."

"She's been up to your house."

"Sure, her family's friends with mine. She comes to see my mother," he glibly lied. Carmen came for a different reason, because she was a junkie, too, but she had dropped from sight and he hadn't seen her, didn't care, either. His only interest in her was the drug he could get from her, or money to buy it --and he didn't need her now. But he had had Carmen, could take her whenever he wished, for she gave easily. The first time it had happened on a roof. She had gone up with him purposely, ready, as she knew, to give herself to him without a struggle, but something came over him. He didn't understand, only felt a sudden anger as she moved toward him on the dark roof. He had raised his fist and knocked her down, taking her that way--but it was like knocking down a dummy and lying upon it, for she didn't protest, nor say anything afterward. "Just like a real whore. That's what she is anyhow," he told himself.

"You don't have to worry about her," he said to China. "I'm not interested. Hell, in an ugly-puss like her? You're my girl."

"Maybe, but it don't seem that way."

"Don't you want to be?" he said, feeling himself growing angry.

"Yes, but you hardly come around, and I keep waiting. You're not like you were."

"Well, I'm going to be like I was."

"Then why don't you ask me to your house? If Carmen can come, why can't I?"

"Who said you can't? Come tomorrow," he said, then added, "In the afternoon. You can meet my mother."

"She'll be there?"

The question took him by surprise, and he saw that she doubted him. Yet there was more than that, other implications; not fear, for he knew she wasn't afraid of him, yet he didn't want to take too much for granted. It was better to play it safe. "My mother'll be home pretty early, maybe about five. But come a little earlier and we'll put on some records."

"Four o'clock? Will that be all right?" As she spoke, her voice dropped almost to a whisper and a kind of tension came between them. She was staring, her eyes reflecting an expression which had only been hinted at before and was always brief, gone almost as it came.

He'd nodded in answer to her question and wondered if she knew he'd lied, for his mother, instead of arriving at five, would only be leaving the factory at that hour. But China had agreed to come at four, which meant she knew they'd be alone for at least an hour, knew why he'd asked and agreed to come. He was glad now for the way it had come about. With other girls it had always been different, a simple thing that demanded nothing of him but bravado, or animal brutality. All the others had been vehicles to prove himself in one way or another, each act no more than a partial release of physical tension, or an explosive but brief and meaningless moment which left him unaccountably dissatisfied with himself and with a lower estimate of the girl. But with China it would be different, she wasn't like the others. She was good, his only, and no guy in the neighborhood could say he'd had her.

She had to go upstairs now. Her mother was leaning out the window, calling to her. She stood up, brushing her skirt.

"I hate to go up," she said. "It's so hot in the house and I can't sleep."

"Is that the reason why you hate to go up?"

"No, you know why. It's you. I'll be thinking of you."

"How?"

"That's for you to find out." She smiled and moved toward the door. "In lots of ways."

He followed her. They stood in the dark vestibule.

"You should have called earlier," China said, "and we could have really talked. We could have done something."

"Yeah, I know." He was sorry now for having disappointed her. "But tomorrow we'll have more time. But you're really coming?"

"Yes. At four."

They were silent now, both realizing the meaning of this appointment and in spite of a desire to rush to meet it, somehow reluctant, each for a different reason too hazy to understand completely. It was as if they stood on the edge of a cliff in a precarious position, endangered by forces far greater than themselves.

Finally China moved, but he caught her arm. "I've got to go up," she protested. "My mother'll be coming down if I don't."

"Wait."

"What for?"

"You know what for."

"I couldn't even guess," she said, but she smiled teasingly. Then tried to escape and winced when his fingers tightened on her arm. "You're hurting me," she said.

"Then don't try to run."

"Let go."

"Not till I get my good-night kiss."

"You won't get it."

"No?" He couldn't stop himself; his fingers gripped her arm tighter, but she didn't cry out. Instead, she dropped her head and half sobbed. The sound brought him back to himself and he released her. She turned away, opened the inner door and started up the stairs.

"Wait!" he said. "I didn't mean it." Then: "Will I see you tomorrow?"

No answer. She didn't stop but went on up the steps slowly. He was ready to go after her but sharp footsteps sounded above. Someone coming down the stairs, China's mother. The footsteps ceased; she called then, and China answered, "Oh, I'm coming!" as she paused at the first landing. Chico waited for her to look down but she didn't, nor did she say anything. He turned away, swearing at himself, and banged the door as he left the house. Then went toward the poolroom to find Angel, or anyone else who might give him a fix or lend him money.

chapter 8

A KNOCKING awoke Chico the next morning. Someone was trying to batter down the door. He started for the kitchen before he recognized Angel's knock and went back to bed again. He wasn't going to spoil this day, not with China coming to the house. For a while longer Angel kept knocking, and then Chico heard his footsteps fade quickly from the landing and closed his eyes.

At two in the afternoon he awoke again, lit a cigarette, and tried to read an old newspaper. Then gave up. Last night had been too much and he'd gone crazy, shooting up more than usual, he'd barely been able to climb the stairs. And all because of the argument or whatever it was with China last night in the hallway.

Now that he thought of it, he suddenly realized that she might not come. He began to wait, on edge already, wondering if she would come and doubting it because he'd frightened her. Because of his temper, and yet he'd held on to himself as he always did, for now he was afraid of his own violence.

At three Angel came back, knocked at the door. This time Chico answered, and was immediately sorry, for Icepick and Tito were tailing Angel.

"Nobody else?" Chico asked.

"Hell, no, do you want somebody else?" Angel missed Chico's sarcasm. "Where were you?" he asked.

"Here."

"All day?"

"Yeah, all day."

"Crap, I almost knocked that door down. You couldn't have been sleeping."

"I was dead. Man, that stuff last night . . ."

"Was real stuff."

"I done up too much."

Angel laughed. "Horse is the boss," he said.

"Yeah, it ain't my boss. I'm going to kick it."

"You've been saying that a lot, kid, like I used to say it."

I used to say it every morning, and every night be high. Now I know it's got me."

"Well, you got a long habit," Chico said.

"First time you snort you got yourself a habit—only you don't know it. It's all in starting. You're caught but you don't know it. After that it's routine."

Chico wanted to refute Angel's words but at the same time felt unable to and changed the subject. "Did anybody see Carmen lately?"

No one had. "She must have dropped down a sewer, or somebody pushed her," Tito said.

"Or went away for a cure," Icepick added. "I never fancied that bitch."

"Cause you couldn't get so much as a pill out of her," said Chico.

"And you could?"

"Anything I wanted."

"That's right," Angel said, coming to Chico's aid. "Do you know she was the first one to show him how to main? She done him up herself, and he didn't know at first that she knew anything about it. He used to snort and not tell her. Hell, and she was even pushing the stuff at the time in a small sort of way. That's why she always had it. No wonder he latched onto that broad."

The others laughed. Then the conversation turned to girls in general. Icepick bragged about his conquests, and Angel made a face.

"You're 'ull of crap," he said. "Cause if you're a real junkie, you lose your nature. You dreamed up all that, goofing off."

"Yeah, when I'm high I can go all night with a broad," Icepick answered.

"And nothing happens. That's why you can go all night. You lose it, you lose interest, you don't really want it any more. Hell, broads don't mean nothing."

"That's 'you," Icepick said. "With me it's different."

"Just wait and you'll find out," said Angel wisely. "Broads don't interest me no more. I don't even look at them unless they're good for a free fix, or got money to give away."

The conversation went on in this vein, and all but Icepick admitted to lessening sexual power and interest in girls; the

drug was the primary object in their lives now. The White God, as Tito called it.

Before Chico knew it, it was four o'clock. A knock sounded on the door. "See who it is," he said to Tito, and Tito went to the door.

"Hello!" China said, coming in. She didn't appear surprised at finding the others there.

Chico looked at the others, and they looked at him. China, not noticing this exchange, came over to the couch and sat down next to Chico. No one said anything, each one looking at the other. Then Icepick smiled and got up. He made a remark under his breath and Chico flushed. China didn't understand. The other two, Angel and Tito, looked at each other dumbly as if they hadn't heard. But Icepick wasn't to be stopped by the silence of the others. "I know you're going to get it, Chico," he said, "and we're going on it too."

With that Chico got to his feet. "What are you trying to do," he said, "grand in front of the girl?"

"Nay, man." Icepick looked surprised now, almost hurt. "Nay, man, I didn't mean nothing!"

"No? Well, get the hell out of my house anyway!" Chico ordered. Icepick sat down, not believing that Chico was serious. In the next moment Chico kicked him in the leg, and Angel jumped up. Grabbing Chico and holding him off, he said, "It's okay, man, we're all blowing. Take it easy." He shoved Icepick toward the door, nodded to Tito and the three of them left.

China turned to Chico now. "Why did you stick up for me?" she asked.

"You know why."

"Why?"

"Cause you're my girl. Nobody can talk like that in front of you when I'm around."

"I didn't know they'd be here. I don't like any of them."

"Well, I didn't ask them. They just came in and I couldn't get rid of them, but now we can get together."

China just looked at him when he said that, then said slowly, "We can get together—but you want too much."

He knew that she understood now and stood up, his hands in his pockets, hesitated, and finally went to the door and threw the bolt of the lock. China stood up immediately and he turned to face her. She didn't move, didn't appear fright-

ened. He walked over to her and put his arms around her and held her tightly as he kissed her. He could feel her heart pounding now and knew she was frightened. But he himself was in doubt, wanting her and yet sensing that he was about to destroy something he wished to keep. In another moment, though, he pushed her down on the couch.

"Are you all set?"

She understood what he meant but didn't answer and that puzzled him. She kept staring, as if waiting for his next move. He grabbed her by the collar of her blouse, and said, "Come on with me."

In his room they stood beside the bed for a moment, then he pushed her and she sat down and looked up at him again in the same way, irritating him.

"What are you looking at me that way for?" he asked.

Suddenly she answered, "I wouldn't do this for anyone but you."

Without knowing why, her words made him feel like crying and he was about to say, I won't touch you, when a knocking on the door startled him. "Get inside," he said, "and fix yourself!" But he didn't have to tell her. She ran into the living room and he followed. By that time the knocking was louder and more insistent. He threw the bolt and opened the door to find his mother standing before him. He grabbed her packages quickly, not allowing her to speak, and took them to the kitchen table.

His mother followed him inside but said nothing about the boited door, for China was standing in the middle of the living room and she saw her.

"My girl, Mom, I wanted her to meet you," Chico said. There was an awkward introduction, then Chico's mother turned away as if to break the tension. "What were you doing all day?" she asked as she began to open the packages on the table.

"Nothing," Chico answered. He looked at China. "Come on," he said. His mother turned her head. She wanted to know where he was going.

"To the movies."

"You're not eating?"

"I'm not hungry." China was already at the door. Chico followed her, but his mother stopped him.

"Here," she said, "you might need this." She handed him a dollar.

Downstairs on the stoop they looked at each other. China's blouse was wrinkled where he'd grabbed it and her hair was mussed. She arranged herself, looked at Chico again.

"I didn't expect my mother so early," he said.

"Do you think she knew?"

"She knew something. I could tell the way she acted, but she must have liked you or she would have said something."

"I almost died. I didn't know what to say."

"Yeah, I know. I felt like a jerk." Chico didn't want to talk about it. "Come on, let's go."

As they neared the corner, they saw Angel, Icepick and Tito. The three of them were standing against a wall.

"Keep on walking," China said, but Chico ignored her and stopped when he reached his friends. She went on ahead.

"What's happening?" Chico asked Angel, for he knew something was in the wind. It was evident in the manner of all three of them.

"Somebody's coming out of that grocery store with a pocket-book and it's going to get snatched," Angel explained quickly. "Where are you heading?"

"I'm taking China to a show."

"What are you, a punk now?"

"Since when do you call me that?"

"Okay, forget it, man. Run along, I know what you want and that's your business." Angel smiled and they touched hands in a gliding movement to show they were still friends. Then Chico hurried after China.

When he caught up to her, he didn't say anything. Neither of them spoke until they were almost a block away and then she looked at him and suddenly burst out crying.

"What are you crying about?" he asked, giving her his handkerchief, but she wouldn't tell him. Even when he insisted she kept repeating, "Nothing. Nothing," until he asked no more.

Finally she dried her tears, and they went on to the show. It was an old picture. Afterwards they walked to her house and sat on the stoop, not speaking. At nine they went upstairs, still silent. Chico said, "Tell me what's wrong?"

She met his eyes then. "I don't know, except I felt funny inside when you kissed me."

"Yeah, what kind of a feeling was it?"

"I was all jumpy and nervous inside."

He knew it, was positive and yet he said, "Are you a virgin?"

"Yes."

"Look, then, if you are, you can stay that way. I'll never ask you again."

Both were silent now. Tears were coming down China's cheeks, and Chico didn't know what to do, confused by this unexpected reaction. "What the hell is she crying about?" he asked himself. For he hadn't done anything, hadn't said anything wrong. In the next moment she surprised him by jumping up from the couch and saying, "I don't care, you can have it."

"I don't want it," he said almost automatically.

"You can have it."

He was stopped by her sudden impulsiveness and by a wish to keep everything as it had been; he didn't understand all that was happening and couldn't face her, didn't want what he'd desired, couldn't speak, either, only kissed her as she waited for him and left her standing there. As he went through the kitchen where her mother and father were sitting, he said good night and hurried out. But China followed and, from the landing, as he descended the stairs, she called after him, "I'll see you tomorrow."

"No, you won't, I'm going downtown." He answered without knowing why and received no reply. On the landing above China remained silent, as puzzled by his reaction as he had been by hers, glad in a way and yet piqued by the unexpected rejection. Far below, the door closed—a remote sound followed by a series of faint vibrations that seemed to set the whole house trembling—then silence, and China, knowing he had gone, turned to her own doorway.

Next day Angel called for Chico just after the noon hour struck and they sat in the house for a while.

"What happened yesterday?" Angel asked. "Did you get to China, or did we bust things up for you?"

"My mother came home early, so we went to the movies."

"That's all?"

"Then we went to her house."

"Yeah?"

Chico described what had happened at China's house and his ultimate refusal to take her after she offered herself to him. "I don't know what happened to me," he said, "but I didn't want it any more."

Angel looked at him skeptically and was about to call him a liar but checked himself and said, "That's horse for you. Like I told you."

"Horse hell, I just didn't want it that way. I didn't feel like doing anything."

"Well, if you like her that much," Angel said slowly, "you better stay with her." He sounded sincere, but his words were deceptive. China was just another girl to him but, if Chico stayed with her, he saw her as a possibility for getting money. At least Chico could con her every now and then, if she liked him, and, if he did get money from her, then he, Angel, would share with him. Yes, China would be good for a few bucks once in a while, but he was too wise to mention that. But if Chico got desperate enough, a little urging would do the trick. "Yeah," he said again, "stick with it, kid, if she's good, cause you won't find one like her every day in the week."

"She's too good for me," Chico admitted.

Bull-crap, Angel thought, and took out some caps he'd been saving. "Want to get high for nothing?" he asked.

There were only four caps for both of them, not enough to really get high; besides, Chico felt down and couldn't refuse. The stuff would straighten him out. They did up two each, then went down to the stoop.

"Look, I got to see somebody so I'm going to run along," Angel said, lighting a cigarette.

"Okay, man, do your business," Chico answered, not caring where Angel was going or what he had to do.

Angel left with a "take care of yourself," and Chico sat down on the stoop, first spreading a handkerchief, and began to nod. The handkerchief was almost an unnecessary measure now, with his best clothes pawned. A year ago he wouldn't have thought of wearing what he had on at the moment. He was always sharp then, proud of his clothes, but now they didn't seem to matter too much. He surveyed the block. No one he knew in sight, nothing to do. His thoughts turned to China and what had happened the previous evening, his own amazing reaction. There was no sense in that. I'm going up

to her house, he told himself. He stood up. Her father and mother worked, no one but China would be home.

Walking slowly, as if his mind were still not quite made up, he stopped at a music store on the way and listened to some records for ten minutes before going on his way. As he knocked at the door, he wished, in a way, that she wouldn't be home, but she answered and smiled when she saw him.

"Who's home?" he asked, though he was sure no one was in but China. When she answered, "Only me," he walked straight into the living room and sat down on the couch. A moment later he stood up and went to the kitchen. "Cook me some eggs," he demanded. He wasn't really hungry but he was half high and wanted to start an argument. At least he attributed this wish to his condition.

China, however, acceded to his demand without hesitation and this irritated him more. When she cracked the eggs in the pan, he said sharply, "Never mind, I don't want them."

This time she looked at him in surprise. "I haven't got eggs to waste."

"So what? Get the hell away from that stove!"

China stared as if she didn't know him. Then walking over to him, she put her arms around his neck.

"What you said last night—that still goes?" he asked.

She nodded, her arms still around him.

"Well, I'm here to take you up on it."

She had no answer to that, but she didn't appear afraid. He pushed her away and stood up, then grabbed her and took her into the living room. "Let's go to bed," he said.

"Do you think I'm crazy?" she answered.

And then he struck her, he didn't know why and didn't mean to strike so hard but it was too late to take it back, too late to say anything. China stood before him, her head down, her hand across her mouth. For a split second he hesitated, then shoved her toward the French doors separating the living room from the bedroom. As she struck them, they flew open and he followed and caught her before she fell. He grabbed her elbows and held them tightly, then released her quickly and pushed her onto the bed. She came down in sitting position and remained that way, staring, and suddenly she appeared old and ugly to him. The transformation struck and he said to himself, "She looks old as hell, and ugly as a bitch," but that didn't stop him. Nothing was going to stop him.

As he leaned forward and put his hands to her shoulders, he expected resistance, but she fell away before him and he went down after her and was upon her then. She didn't say anything, lying still for several moments and then began a movement that told him there'd be no resistance, that she wanted him where he was, a movement begun slowly which quickly reached in unexpected pitch of violence. Even the way she looked up at him was unexpected, an expression on her face and in her eyes that he'd never seen before and which somehow frightened him, but not so much that he wished to stop. For he couldn't stop until it was done, and when it was done he rolled off her with an odd feeling of dissatisfaction as if nothing had really taken place.

China got up first and went to the bathroom. When she came out again, she found him playing records in the living room. When he finally looked up she said, "Are you satisfied now?"

"Yeah," he said.

He felt she was trying to start an argument and, to stop her, he lifted one of the records, intending to smash it against the wall.

"Don't break it or you'll have to pay for it," China calmly told him.

At another time he could have done it and she wouldn't have said that. Now he was more of a mind than ever to smash the record in his hand. He wanted to smash all of them but stopped himself, put the record down without saying a word, and waited till the disc on the machine was finished. Then he put another on, and didn't speak. Neither of them spoke. When he could no longer stand the silence he stood up. "I'm swinging," he said and started for the door, but stopped when China called. As he turned, he saw her coming toward him and waited till she was close.

"Kiss me," she said and moved closer still. For a moment he hesitated, then took her in his arms, kissed her and released her quickly, all but thrusting her away.

"Do you want me to come with you?" she asked.

"It's not necessary," he answered.

"Oh, I see. Now that you had me you don't want me."

"Yeah," he said. He knew immediately that he shouldn't have spoken that way and yet didn't attempt to cover up; it was the way he felt. He'd had her and didn't want her, didn't

need her any more, he thought. She was still standing there, hurt, waiting for him to say something. But he couldn't speak, for there was nothing left inside him now. He turned away again and went to the door, not expecting to be called back this time. He was right, too; she didn't call him back.

chapter 9

HE DIDN'T UNDERSTAND what had happened and didn't try to—only felt disgust for himself and a strange emptiness as if he had lost something, an indefinable substance which had suddenly vanished. It was China's fault; he blamed her because it was easier than to blame himself, but he didn't want to think about it. He banished it from his mind as he reached the street and began to walk quickly with no destination in mind yet knew he wasn't going home. He couldn't face those empty rooms, a house that was always empty by day except for week ends. It was the one place he didn't want to go near now.

To get high again, completely stoned. He needed the white stuff to obliterate everything, but he had no money, and the neighborhood appeared deserted. The hot sun had driven everyone indoors and a blinding light glazed the streets. It would be too hard to get a fix now, and Angel wasn't around. But Chico didn't want Angel's company, didn't know what he wanted until he rounded a familiar corner. Then he realized where he was going—to his grandmother's house. All the while his feet had been taking him there.

A few minutes later he stood before her door, knocked and waited. His sister and her husband lived there also but he knew they would be away at this time of day and was glad, for he didn't want to meet them. Presently a chain bolt slid back, the door opened slowly, and there stood his grandmother, short, fat and ugly. This time she didn't greet him as usual and he almost turned away.

"You're hungry?" she asked after she closed the door.

"No." He almost snapped at her and wondered what had brought him here.

The old woman stared at him. She was darker of skin, seemingly of another race, too small and too old, with none of the graces the aged might have possessed. For she was old beyond her years, her features molding all the deprivations one could know into a wrinkled mask that expressed nothing, not even pain, despair or forlorn hope, though she had known all these over and over again. Now she seemed beyond everything. As Chico sat down, she appraised him with dark alert eyes, then said, "What's the matter with you, boy?"

"Nothing, just let me alone!"

"What happened?" The old woman asked this as if she hadn't spoken. "Is it a girl?"

The last made him lift his head and smile.

"So it is a girl."

"What of it?"

"It's always a girl. I know." The old woman's eyes appeared to be smiling now but her face was still a mask. "What else could it be?" she said.

"Yeah, what else?"

"Are you in trouble?"

He knew what she meant and shook his head. "She's a good girl," he said. "It was just an argument."

"Then why do you argue? Is it your temper?"

"I don't know, but it was my fault." He knew that much but couldn't say why it was his fault. For the moment he wanted to ask but decided not to, realizing she could not help him.

"Then, if it's your fault, go to the girl and tell her you're sorry," the old woman said. "It won't hurt you, you know. You say she's a good girl?"

"Too good for me."

"The first time you ever said that. But you're too young yet; there'll be others with a good-looking boy like you. Tell her you're sorry."

He lit a cigarette without answering, but already he knew he was going back to China to apologize. He had wanted to at her house but could not find the words. That was why he had come here to his grandmother's, knowing she'd tell him the right thing to do, for she would know. Even more than his mother, more than anyone else. She was watching him now; her dark eyes darted away and came back.

"You don't come around so much any more," she said, nodding her head. "Is it because you haven't time?"

For the moment he wondered if she knew anything, if she had seen him somewhere in the streets when he was high and goofing off. Or had she heard he was on the stuff? There was no way of knowing, her face and eyes told him nothing—but she was a wise one who knew many things, and he could not meet her eyes now. He thought of leaving but there was no place to go. A soft wind stirred the curtain at the window, bringing with it a touch of coolness to belie the violence of the heat outside. It was quiet here, yet not empty like his own house. He didn't move but faced the window, answering the old woman's questions with half-truths, which didn't deceive her at all.

"Your brother-in-law isn't here in the day," she said, "and you used to come all the time."

"So I don't any more," he answered, feeling cornered. "I got things to do. Important things."

"So you are a man already with important things to do?"

"That's right, I'm a man!"

She might have smiled at this, perhaps inside herself she did; perhaps she even understood the full meaning of his declaration, not that he was a man yet, for he wasn't—at sixteen—and no longer a boy, either. That she saw clearly. Not one or the other, but part of both—like a swimmer caught on a tidal wave which might recede and carry him safely to shore, or, more than likely, dash him against the waiting rocks. This she saw, too, and sensed her helplessness, for she had only words, and what were words to youth when life challenged at every step? This new city, too, with all its hazards; there were promises and prizes also, but more of promises and she wondered if the prizes were worth the effort. And who among her own people received them? Afraid for Chico, she looked toward the holy picture on the wall, her lips moving; she might have been praying. Chico turned his head, aware of her silence, and she averted her eyes.

Then she said, "You're still not hungry?"

Because she knew, he smiled and nodded his head, admitting his hunger and her wisdom. He watched her begin preparing the meal, the ritual moves he knew so well. Like one in a trance he saw her go about her work and finally turned to the window again, the flawless sky drawing his eyes.

In a moment he was back on that distant island which had spawned him, a dream island now that owned existence only to memory. Back in his grandmother's house in that little town beside a trickling stream which suddenly swelled and ran riot after each storm, carrying tumbling tin cans and dead chickens in its flight. A little boy again, who never wore shoes, and refused to stay in bed when told. He smiled to himself and then his face clouded as he recalled the Santa Claus mask his grandmother had bought. How ugly it was, and she wore it to frighten him. She came into the room with it on and warned him in a voice he did not know, telling him he would be eaten if he got out of bed. So terrified he dared not move, he fell asleep, only to wake later to the sound of footsteps. It was the old woman going out to dump the garbage, but he did not know this and screamed, then ran from the room, ran from the empty house and fell in the dark, gashing his head on a stone. In bed again, with his wound bathed, he heard his grandmother crying but he did not know the real reason for her tears. Later, though, he understood when, rummaging through a drawer, he found the mask. She had cried because she had frightened him, and to reassure her he refused to go to bed until she had donned the mask again. He waited for her to enter the bedroom and, when she approached, he tore the mask from her face, threw it on the floor and laughed at her.

This was another step, part of the magic of growing up, but such things didn't happen here in this city. Everything was different, he knew that now more than ever and wished he were back in that little town in Puerto Rico, wished he were a small boy again. Noticing his silence, Chico's grandmother asked him what he was thinking of and he replied, "The house where we all used to live, and the mask you used to scare me with."

"When you were small."

"And the stories you'd tell me. Remember the one about the Indians?"

The old woman nodded her head.

"I always liked that one. Tell it again."

"I am busy."

"When you're finished then?"

The old woman glanced at him and went on with her cooking. She set a plate on the table, heaped with rice and a single pork chop. For herself she poured a cup of dark coffee and sat

down, saying, "It's ready. Are you going to eat, or look out the window all day?"

Chico moved over to the table, as if reluctant, and picked up his fork. "Now that you're taking it easy," he said, "you can tell me about the Indians again."

"Why?"

"Because I like the way you tell it."

Shrugging, the old woman appeared weary now, for hadn't she told the story enough times already? The same one over and over again which she herself believed because she'd repeated it so often. A story whose source she'd long forgotten and so made her own, a tale whose genesis was truth, but a truth long since changed and darkened by time, perhaps a local tale confined to the small village where she'd been born, and she the last teller, carrying a dead ember of a tropic island's past to this northern island. A tale of Indians, the original inhabitants before Spain enslaved Puerto Rico.

She was small, the old woman said, and she lived in the country when this took place. Playing alone one evening she heard the drums of the Indians and saw the flames of their fire. This was near the mouth of a great cave, she continued, and she watched for a while because the Indians, she knew, had long since died out or no longer existed as a separate race. But here they were gathered around a great fire, celebrating, and so she watched and finally ran to tell her father.

Here Chico put down his fork and forgot his food, for the old woman had caught him. As she spoke softly but with a kind of animation which made him shiver, he watched the two gold teeth flash in her mouth and forgot where he was, transported back across a thousand miles of water to that small Puerto Rican town where he had lived, for such a story as she was telling now the old woman used to reserve for rainy nights. And it all came back with the words of the tale, the rain falling, pattering on the tin roof of the house and the screen door squeaking as it moved with the pressure of the wind, thunderclaps and the vivid violence of the tropic lightning, and through it all the palm fronds scraping against the walls—a horrible sound which made him think that someone was trying to climb up the side of the house. He could hear the small frogs chanting, and the tall grass bending under the wind, and after a particularly vivid flash of lightning, the loud clear startling bugle of a rooster.

For a moment he almost lost the thread of the story but the old woman paused, then went on and he listened again.

"My father and the men brought guns and torches," she said, "and went to the cave. The Indians were dancing around the fire, all of them, but one stopped and turned around and saw the men. Then suddenly they all disappeared and their fire went out. The men were frightened but they went to the cave and, once inside, their flares died. No light could ever stay alive in there. So they left and next day went back and found stone knives, pots and bracelets. There were paintings on the walls, too, but no Indians. They had disappeared and were never seen again. I, too, went to the cave and felt people walking inside and, because of that, never went again. It was a bad place, but people said that gold was hidden there and they decided to dynamite it, though the wiser ones stopped this, knowing if it happened, that the whole island would split in half and go down into the sea."

The story was finished and the old woman sat still, her eyes glazed. Neither she or Chico spoke, the old woman dreaming and the boy remembering his own father whom he had accompanied to the cave one night. But they never entered it, for his father stopped at the mouth of the cave, believing he heard footsteps within. "Come on out!" he'd shouted, and as Chico felt someone creeping toward him, his father fired his gun, dropped it in fright and they both fled.

Memory vanished then. The chair in which the old woman sat scraped back, and somewhere a factory whistle blew. A moment later she stood up and left the room, returned with a pack of cigarettes and lit one with a trembling hand—but Chico didn't notice this. He had picked up his fork and was busy eating now.

chapter 10

THAT NIGHT he went back to China's house and apologized for what he'd said to her. She was glad that he'd come, and that made it easier for him to speak. Everything seemed the same again, better even, and

they went for a walk. Later, they sat on her stoop and talked and she spoke of what was going on in the neighborhood.

This one and that one, she'd heard, were smoking reefers. Others were taking dope. She named names, and Chico stirred uncomfortably, irritated by her talk. Not that she accused him but he knew that she was hinting, warning him, for she named his friends and all the ones he knew who were on the drug. She was right about them, too, not that she really knew. Someone had told her, probably one of her girl friends, and he wondered if she knew about him. She couldn't have, he decided, yet he felt uncomfortable. Besides, her words seemed senseless; she didn't know what she was talking about, didn't understand what the drug could do for one if one didn't allow it to gain control. Only another junkie could ever understand that. Still, he listened and smiled to himself when she warned him about his friends, smiled because she didn't know about him. And he wasn't going to tell her now, for he had it licked, had kicked his habit. Not that he intended to quit altogether. After all, a few pills now and then wouldn't hurt, and she'd never know the difference. He stood up, restless now and bored with the one-sided conversation. Besides, he felt he'd given her a little too much attention and, by apologizing, had played into her hands. No girl was ever going to tell him what to do.

Puzzled because he'd gotten up, China was about to ask him what was wrong when her mother called from a window above. She had to go up and Chico had lost his chance to make it seem that he was leaving her. It was she who was leaving him now.

The next day China called for him unexpectedly while Angel, Icepick and Tito were in the house. This time there was no trouble, though, for they left quietly and China sat down. Outwardly quiet, she appeared to be bubbling underneath and suddenly said, "Let's get married?"

Chico didn't know if she was joking or not, but he answered flatly, "What are we going to live on, your father?"

"No, you're going out and get a job when we get married."

"Yeah. Just like that."

"Well, aren't you?"

Seeing now that she was serious, he said, "Look, let's stop this silly talk," and got up to put on a record before she could challenge him. When he turned to her again, he knew she was

puzzled, hurt a little, but in a moment she recovered and came to him, sitting on his lap when he sat down. She kissed him then and they listened to the record, several records, until he mentioned that it was getting late, meaning that his mother would be coming soon.

China stood up then, not taking the hint as he'd meant it. Smiling, she said, "Walk me home."

He didn't like the way she said that, as if it were an order and that she owned him. But even if she had asked in an ordinary way, or begged him, he had no intention of complying. "I don't feel like walking," he said. "I'm tired." Not that he was, but he'd had her and believed he didn't particularly care any more. Besides, he had to put her in her place and show her he wasn't at her beck and call.

And that hurt her, for she understood now. Without a word she walked out. As her footsteps faded on the stairs, Chico lit a cigarette and said to himself, "She's trying to play it cool, and that's the type you got to smack on the ass."

He began to avoid her then and, when she called at the house, he let her knock but didn't answer. Friends told him she'd been asking for him, too, and he explained that he was giving her the treatment. In a week's time she finally realized that he was avoiding her and didn't come to the house any more, nor ask about him. Meanwhile he became mildly interested in a girl named Gloria, a good friend of China.

A party at Gloria's house brought him and China together again. Chico knew she'd be invited if only because Gloria wanted to show him off, and he went with the idea of showing Gloria that he wasn't her personal property. But that was only part of the reason; he also wanted to let China know that she didn't mean a thing to him.

Of course, he'd been shooting up, but not too much of late, though on the day of the party he went overboard with a big load and slept through till his mother came home. After supper he slept again, it was almost twelve o'clock when he started for Gloria's house. A late arrival suited him. "They're wondering where I am," he told himself. "Everybody's been asking for me. Damn, coming in, I'll kick the door down and everybody'll say, Here's Chico. They'll know it's me."

As he entered the hall, he saw a few of the boys from the neighborhood smoking reets; the hall stank with the odor of weed. They greeted him and he ordered them to hit the

street before someone called the cops. He mounted the stairs then, feeling big, and in the eyes of the reefer boys he'd chased, he was. They knew he was on drugs, a real horsehead who hit the main. It gave him a kick to know that the others looked up to him, that he had a place in the world and a definite feeling of prestige.

The lights were dim, the air clouded with smoke. Couples were dancing in corners. Everyone knew him at once even though he didn't kick the door down. There were greetings and he smiled, waved his hand; Gloria was coming toward him now but he saw China standing against a wall. He didn't take his eyes from her till Gloria pushed him.

"So you finally came," she said.

"Yeah, I gave you a break," he replied. "How's the party?"

"Not bad for the others—only for me. I missed you."

"Naturally, baby."

"Didn't you miss me?"

"I was sleeping. Who's here?"

"Not too much of a crowd. Hey, are you high?"

"Who, me? Never." Again he glanced toward China, who was nonchalantly smoking a cigarette. Gloria noticed.

"I invited her. You don't mind?" she asked.

"Why should I? It's your party."

He spoke abruptly and, not knowing quite how to take him, she asked if he wanted to dance.

"Not now," he said. "What's in the kitchen?"

"Nothing much is left."

"Okay." He didn't want a drink, or anything to eat. He didn't know what he wanted, but his eyes went to China again and the old feeling came back. Gloria didn't interest him. Ignoring her, he walked over to China and she turned to face him.

"Want to dance?" he said. She didn't answer but moved, almost swayed toward him and he found her in his arms. They didn't speak, words were unnecessary for both knew they wanted each other.

Gloria was watching, furious. She waited till Chico left China temporarily, and trailed him to another room.

"What are you doing?" she said.

He knew what she meant immediately. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

"Well, I thought you quit her?"

"So did I." He grinned at her, and nodded to Tito, who had just entered the room. When Tito came over, he told him to keep Gloria company and walked nonchalantly away.

Back with China, he put his arms around her and kissed her neck and they danced once more to a slow number, music in which he felt everything but themselves dissolve. She didn't talk and neither did he, but everything, he knew, was perfect now, the whole world changed and the future ordered. As her cheek touched his, he closed his eyes and held her tighter. There'd never be anyone else but China.

Gloria came back into the room. She was with Tito and still put out but not too much, for Tito's attentiveness disarmed her. He asked her for a dance and she accepted just as someone pounded on the door. Disengaging herself from Tito, she opened the door and found herself face to face with several strange youths.

"There's a party here?" one asked.

"Yes, a private party," Gloria said, and was suddenly pushed backward. The newcomers intended to crash, as everyone in the room knew. Chico had stopped dancing when he saw the door open. The light from the hall shone into the dim room and he watched their faces, those of the party and of the intruders who were bent on taking over. In another moment he crossed the room and shoved back the one who'd pushed Gloria, saying, "Don't put your hands on her, man!"

It was a warning and a challenge. Tito suddenly drew a knife. "Now get the hell out of here!" he said, and the strangers withdrew. At the door one of them warned: "That calls for something, we'll be back."

Tito slammed the door in their faces and put his knife away, but Chico knew there'd be trouble now. They were bound to return, or they'd lie in wait outside. "Let's jump them now before they know," he said. "Is everybody down?"

If only because the girls were there, the others were ready to join in and they all started for the door. As Chico opened it, he raised his hand for silence. From below in the hall voices of the departing youths could be heard. "We'll get them outside, no use screwing up the house," Chico said quietly. The others nodded, following him down the stairs to the street where they suddenly rushed the strangers with an assortment of weapons. Chico had grabbed a bottle from the hall and now, as he moved into the fight, it was not hate that he felt for

them but a distorted sense of pride, a challenge to his manhood.

Chico was out in front. "Come on, mother-jumpers," he yelled. "You don't have to come back. We're ready now!" Even as he yelled out he was aware of the girls upstairs calling from the windows—and thought he heard China's voice. It was a grandstand play for ail of them and for China in particular. As those who had sought to break into the party turned, he flung himself among them, then swung the bottle at the nearest head. As it broke, he saw the luckless one go down, the others scatter, to re-form in a group immediately. A moment later a single shot sounded and, even while the echo clung to the dark street, lights began to go on everywhere in the block. The fight ended as everyone ran, Chico and the bunch toward Gloria's house, the others toward the nearest corner.

A record was playing, a slow number, and couples were dancing again as if nothing at all had happened. No one mentioned the brief encounter, but down below in the street a prowler car, with lights blazing and siren wailing, screeched to a stop. A minute later there were heavy steps on the stairs, an authoritative knock on Gloria's door. The record went spinning on and on, the couples dancing in the dim light. No one paid attention to the second louder knocking but Gloria, who signaled to her mother. Even when the door opened the couples dancing paid no attention—except for Chico, who caught the phrase, "... No one from this house," as Gloria's mother answered the law. The door closed, then, and the heavy footsteps faded on the stairs. China said:

"Did you have to do that?"

"Do what?"

"Hit the boy with a bottle?"

"He had it coming, trying to bust in that way. They all did."

"But they went away."

"Yeah, to bring back their mob," said Chico. "Now they'll know better. Hey, what are you talking? Suppose we let them in, let them take over? We're not faggots."

"But suppose you were killed? Who fired the gun?"

"Oh, one of them," Chico lied. "My boys don't carry rods. Anyway, there was nothing to it, so forget it."

"But . . ."

"I said forget it!"

"It's getting late. I'd like to go home, Chico."

"Stay a while."

"Well—just one more record."

"That ain't nothing. What's the matter, don't you like the party?"

"I don't like your friends."

"That's nice, just let them hear that. And what about your friends?"

"What about Gloria?"

"Yeah, what about her?"

"You've been going with her."

"So what?"

"But you've been dancing with me instead of her."

"That's my business."

"Does that mean you still like me?"

He hesitated, then suddenly answered, "It's more than that. The first time I laid eyes on you it was more than that."

"I know it, I know it!" China murmured. As they danced she moved closer still and raised her mouth to his; their lips met; then their tongues explored the warmth of each other's mouth and to Chico now the music seemed far away, faint and unreal. There was only China in his arms, her burning tongue gliding and darting—but suddenly it was gone and he felt her move away a little, her head draw back, not to escape but to ask a question. "Let's swop spit?" she said.

"Yeah, that's freak stuff," he answered to her surprise. "Just say it again and I'll punch you right in the mouth!"

"I'm sorry," China said. "I wouldn't have asked if . . ."

"Get your stuff, we're swinging," he said. Down in the street, he hailed a cruising taxi to take her home.

chapter II

AT SEVEN the next morning Chico's mother left for work. The others had gone already. Unable to sleep any more, Chico got up, put the radio on and sat wondering what the day would bring, then made breakfast for himself. At eight, Angel called.

"What's happening?" Chico asked.

"Not so much. What are you doing up so early?"

"Couldn't sleep."

"You look kind of beat. Don't say you're still trying to kick your habit?"

"I'm not saying cause I ain't got a habit."

Angel grinned. "Then you're off it, man?"

"Not all the way. You can't cold turkey it."

"Nobody can without dying. You got anything?"

"Not a cap," Chico said.

"Got any money then?"

"Not enough. What have you got?"

Angel was smiling now; he couldn't restrain himself. "Turn off that radio and put on some real records," he said. Chico sat where he was, knowing something was up. "Go ahead," Angel urged, then got up to do it himself. "I could be high right now," he said.

"Did you score?" Chico wanted to know, feeling the urge for the drug again and a remote but telltale pain in the lower part of his body.

"Soon as I got up," Angel answered. "Man, this was easy. My mother sent me to pay the bills and it all came to fifteen but I charged her twenty-two. She don't know nothing."

"You did that on your own mother?"

"Yeah, I had to the way I was feeling this morning. It ain't the first time."

"You're gone, then. You're going to end in the gutter."

Angel laughed, feeling good. "Yeah, it don't matter where as long as I've got the stuff. That's the way I want to die, the best way—stoned as a bitch!"

For a second, as he gazed at Angel, Chico saw what was happening to him, to both of them, and felt frightened—but the vision was unclear, like a dim distorted reflection mirrored from a distant room which vanished almost as it came. "I got some good stuff," he heard Angel saying. "Fine stuff. Do you want a fix?"

Chico hesitated a moment. But a cap and a half wouldn't hurt, he thought. It would cool his urge, help him beat the habit. Standing up then, he went to get the works. As he did, Angel unloosened his belt to get it ready to tie his arm.

Later, when they had finished shooting up and the works

were cleaned, Angel put a record on and they sat close and listened. It was a fast number and because Chico was high from having taken more of the drug than he intended, he began to dig the music, all the notes and, in particular, the special horns. One instrument stood out, a trumpet blown so sweet that Chico felt the player pulling the music out of the very air; it made him feel at ease, the music was being played for him and him only. On the next disc a sax stood out and he knew, as soon as he heard it, that this was something special, in a class of its own. If that cat dies, it dies with him. he thought, cause he's blowing ideas, something new that's never been heard before. And because it blended with his high, he forgot everything, even Angel who was digging the music and hearing notes that belong only to that special universe, phantom notes attuned to the ear of the addict.

A half-hour later they silenced the record player and talked of the music. "That last one, wasn't that crazy?" Chico said. "Did you get that little part he was blowing? It sounded supernatural."

"Yeah, you're right. I went for it all the way."

"They were really blowing. You could feel it, feel it like you were there—right out," Chico said, and was lost for words then.

"Yeah, it's like it's not happening, but it is," Angel tried to explain, but knew he couldn't express what he felt and heard. "Only you yourself can tell inside if you hear it again," he added.

"You can't tell it at all. You feel it, that's all, and then it's gone."

The conversation went on in that manner as if they were discussing the music of angels, then veered abruptly to a more earthy plane when Chico remarked how quiet the neighborhood was, meaning the gangs were inactive now.

"Drugs did that," Angel explained. "As soon as the stuff came on the scene. Yeah, club-fighting was big-time once. Now it ain't crap."

"We're growing out of it. That's kid stuff, and anyhow them judges sent too many away for long stretches. All the boys think about now is getting high, getting clothes, and getting pussy."

"Let me get high, that's all. You can have the pretty clothes

and the broads," said Angel and, when Chico shook his head in disagreement, he went on: "Clothes are only good to pawn, and broads to con. Now take them pretty shoes of yours, you could get three for them right now. Or China, she ought to clock for a few bucks if she's loving you so much."

"Nay, I need the shoes, and I'm not conning China."

"You conned Carmen, didn't you?"

"That was different. She's a whore."

Angel fell silent now. Having felt his friend out, he knew the time wasn't ripe yet and nodded off. Chico nodded, too, then suddenly jumped up and fixed his tie. This activity caused Angel to open his eyes.

"Let's swing it to the poolroom and cool it there," Chico suggested.

"Solid, there's nothing here."

Once in the poolroom, they sat down to watch a game, Angel leaning back and nodding off immediately, Chico sitting on the edge of his chair to keep awake, his chin at rest on his hand, absorbed at first, taking in every move of the players and missing nothing, but at last leaning back too, and nodding off.

A slap brought him back to wakefulness—and a warning—"The man's on the scene," which meant the Law. Angel was awake, too, both were alert now and they looked around, noting the newcomer immediately, a strange face in the crowd. The games went on at the tables but there was a new element in the air, an undercurrent of tension and uneasiness, until the stranger went on his way again.

Chico and Angel watched the players at the table before them once more, alternately watched and nodded. At last, Chico followed only the erratic travelogue of the colored balls. Each time in the first moment after nodding, he saw them larger and brighter under the table light, the eight ball and the cue ball as enormous shining spheres. Angel mumbled, "He should have made that shot," but which shot Angel meant was hard to tell. Chico was nodding off again, his mind going back to another time, in the near yet distant past, to a girl whose name was dust and whose body had provided his first experience. No more than thirteen she was, and all one had to do was tell her how bad he was to get it from her. With his eyes closed it all came back as if it were real—how he waited on

the corner with a friend till she came along, a chubby kid with a short dress and tight sweater. It was all very clear, the brutal act, the blundering climax, even the conversation—how she refused to go with them because of the hour, and the blow which quickly changed her mind. The school yard where they took her, and her feigned plea of innocence until she knew there was no escape and at last gave in. How he waited while his friend went first, then his own awkward fumbling over-anxious attempt and, afterward, the girl saying, "I have to go home now," and his friend replying, "You ain't going home till we get ready to let you go." And finally walking away, leaving her there on her own coat, with the sound of their laughter echoing in the dark school yard.

With a jerk he came back to himself, opened his eyes, and there was the poolroom again, the players, and the colored balls spinning across the table. Angel had awakened, too; a moment later he stood up and said, "Let's blow, there's nothing here for us."

In the hot, baking street they went back to Chico's house. There, with nothing else to do, they sat and nodded again, and the drug wore off. Then Angel suggested that they get high again and went to the kitchen for a glass of water and matches. By the time he came back, Chico had stripped his jacket off and arranged the works. Angel did the rest, measuring the water, preparing the cotton, filling the spoon, and finally lit a match to heat the stuff. When it was ready he tied his arm up and lifted the syringe, with one quick movement catching the vein. Chico followed him and hurried to clean the works, feeling the drug in him already, an overwhelming pleasant sensation. Even before he put the works away he was nodding and had to jerk his head up to complete the task; then he sat back and felt his body go floating away.

Even though he didn't know the time, he realized it was late. "Come on, we got to get out of here," he said, shaking Angel, who was sprawled on the couch. "My people will be coming."

Startled by the shaking, then angry, Angel snarled, "Man, take it easy, I don't like that!"

"Well, we've got to blow. It's late."

Angel yawned, still half high. They both were, but they couldn't afford to remain in the house.

"Let's go to my cellar," Angel suggested. "Nobody will bother us there."

They left the house and went down the stairs. Shadows were in the streets now, a dusky blue light, and above the rooftops, a clearer atmosphere where the brisk cries of the sharp-tongued day blended with the soft voiceless wind from the river. The fever heat of the day had slackened, too, replaced by the maddening complications of traffic and an effusive jargon of horns—but Chico and Angel were beyond all this, unaware of the transitory hours, the cries of children playing in the street. Like wanderers from another world, they went blindly toward Angel's cellar, until a familiar voice called Chico's name. He knew who it was instantly but chose to ignore the caller, feeling the bottom of his stomach fall like a weight.

A hand fell upon his shoulder and whirled him around; he found himself face to face with his brother. Immediately, he made an effort to straighten up, throw his shoulders back, but Paulie knew.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked.

"Nothing," Chico answered.

"Don't hand me that; you're high. What did I tell you about that?"

"I ain't high, Paulie."

"You're half stoned, you little punk. You think you're big-time, don't you? You think you're doing something great."

Chico knew he was caught, and there was no way out, for Paulie understood too well. Paulie had threatened to whip him in the street, too, and he was afraid of his brother's temper. Better to admit a little than to try to dodge. "I don't hit up in the main, I only snort," he said.

"Yeah, you only snort. Roll up your sleeve." He looked at Chico's arm, seeing the telltale punctures. "I wouldn't be surprised if you had a habit already. I ought to belt you. God-damn, look at yourself!" Paulie struck him in the mouth, knocked him down and lifted him up again. "That's nothing to what you're going to get; I'm going to bust your balls for you!" He shook Chico till his brains rattled, saying, "Where did you get it? Who is he?" When Chico refused to answer, he shoved him away, and went toward the poolroom to give Domingo a final warning.

chapter 12

AFTER WHAT HAPPENED with Paulie, Chico began to stay in the house again and avoid everyone but China. It was the only way to beat his habit and he had to do that now; something serious would happen if he didn't. The incident with Paulie had been more humiliating than painful, but he was afraid his brother would tell his mother he was using dope. This threat alone kept him in line, and yet he didn't stop using it altogether. His excuse—that to cease abruptly would only cause him suddenly to plunge deeper—became a convenient and acceptable prop now. Even that very night after Paulie caught him on the street, he went out and got a fix—the last good one, he'd told himself, before he kicked his habit. That, too, was convenient, to say one thing and mean another. It was as if two persons resided within him now, or there were two separate parts of his mind but one dominating the other without allowing the other to know this, for he was utterly sincere, he thought, when he told himself he was going to break his habit, absolutely convinced of this. He saw himself possessed of the strength to deny the habit. At the same time there existed this other side of himself which he continuously denied, a self which acted out the very things which he refused to believe in, a misty, insubstantial creature, which he did not accept or recognize and had no image of. Yet it dominated, substantiating itself in action; therefore it was real and deep inside himself he knew this, felt it and was afraid.

But this was only one element, existing from the very beginning when he first took the drug. Fear had many facets. There was fear of the Law, fear of dying from an overdose, fear of tampered drugs, fear of not being able to get it when he needed it, fear of discovery, of enslavement, and, finally, fear of the driving power of the drug which might even induce, in a moment of desperation, a murderous act. In spite of all this, he continued to indulge, deceiving himself with the

egotistical and deadly belief that he was in control, ignoring the simple and constant proof that he was not.

He was playing it carefully now, shooting up only a cap and a half at a time and not getting real high, thinking he was kicking his habit that way but in reality feeding it, teasing it, compounding in his system a greater demand without realizing the nature of the process or the power of the drug.

As long as his mother and China didn't know. He carefully timed the shots to avoid suspicion and yet he had a feeling that they knew. Didn't they look at him oddly now, as if he were a different person? Didn't they see some change that even he couldn't see? Or perhaps they'd heard. The neighborhood was full of rumors, people knew what was going on. Still, he saw himself as a cool cat and he hadn't let himself go completely. Front meant a lot, being clean and dressed right. He had enough hold on himself to deceive the proper persons and, miraculously, he stayed out of jams.

But one evening the urge came with greater force. It began by his feeling the need of the drug, but a part of himself denied the feeling. Later, he gave in, perhaps because he was feeling low and had nothing to do. Once he was high, though, he felt good; the sensation was great, yet even as he hit himself with the spike he cursed himself for taking more than the amount he'd allotted himself. Fuck it, it's done, he thought. I'll keep on doing it.

He started for China's house while he was still too high. He knew it was the wrong thing to do, yet he ignored the fact, feeling that he possessed immunity from detection. No one was ever going to find out, he was sure of that, sure of everything now. He knocked on China's door and straightened up. When she opened the door he was stiff as a ramrod. His gait and the way he held himself were so unnatural that she couldn't fail to notice these exaggerations. Even the manner in which he kissed and greeted her was not his way, yet he himself felt he was carrying the part naturally. Still, as soon as they entered the living room, he was aware that she found something strange about him. It was in her eyes. She appeared to be searching for something, and yet he wondered why, believing himself to be the same person as always, in spite of the drug which was still acting on him.

In order to keep her mind off his condition, he asked her to play some records. While the music went on they talked, or,

rather, she did. He hardly listened, his mind taken by the music and his own thoughts, wondering when he was going to get high again. He realized that she knew he wasn't really listening to her. Her tone of voice had changed, becoming softer, and her eyes sought his, trying to find something. He had to cool it, play clever, but his state was such that he couldn't help but nod. His eyes closed before he realized it and his head fell forward, but in an instant he caught himself. To throw her off guard he said, "God, I've got an awful headache!"

In spite of that, he knew she understood it was more than that. I'm acting as I usually do, he thought, but maybe I only think that. For a moment it seemed to him that not only China's but all the eyes in the world were on him and he could find no place to hide.

China said, "Well, do you want something for it?"

"No, it'll go in a few minutes." He opened his eyes wide, blinked them, then squinted, feigning intense pain.

"You're sure you don't want something?" China asked with concern.

"No, it's all right." He sought to allay any suspicions she might have by talking to her. Any topic would have done but he found his mind suddenly blank, he couldn't think of a thing to say, words wouldn't form; all he could do was sit there. Again he found her staring at him, wondering. He wanted to admit everything and ask her help, but each time he was on the point of speaking something stopped him.

There was only one thing to do, then: hide it. Because he couldn't tell, he resorted to holding her hand and kissing her, talking to her in a manner which he'd never used before. Again she asked, "Is anything wrong? You can tell me, Chico."

The words roused his anger. He didn't want her to probe, yet he wished to tell her. But if he did, he realized he might lose her and feared that. "Nothing's wrong," he answered, and again nodded, unable to stop himself. He closed his eyes for a moment and jerked up abruptly. It seemed that he was sitting with her for the first time, watching her and completely lost, while someone stood behind him, telling him what to say and he unable to say it. When he found his tongue, he spoke stiltedly, having to memorize his words before using them. And China, more and more, knew something was really wrong. Still, she didn't say what he was afraid she would say.

Instead, she spoke of his friends, Angel in particular, saying, "He's the worst, and he's influencing you."

Hearing this, his anger flared again. She was trying to pick his friends, boss him, and prying into his personal affairs. He held on to himself, and said, "What do you mean?"

"Well, he's not nice, not up to my standards or yours."

"But that's not so, he's a real friend and I like him. I wouldn't be with him if he wasn't."

"Well, I heard different."

"Maybe you did but it's not so, whatever you heard. You believe me, don't you? That's a rumor."

"I've heard a lot of rumors," China went on, looking directly at him.

"Yeah, what rumors?" he asked, half afraid of what she would answer. "Who told you?"

"Oh, I just heard." She was evading the issue. "I've heard lots about him and others." Here she stopped and looked directly at him, almost accusingly. He expected her to mention him and was afraid again.

"Just heard what?" he said.

"Nothing." She spoke almost flippantly.

"Yeah, you heard nothing. Don't try to dodge," he said. "It's my friend we're talking about."

"Maybe he isn't your friend. He might be your worst enemy."

They were further away from the point now, his prying getting him nowhere, only stimulating his anger; he was almost furious, though he didn't show it. For once, she acted as if she were the stronger of the two: he felt that, too, and it wounded his vanity, infuriating him more because suddenly she seemed so capable. He kept at her, wanting to know what she had against Angel, not so much because of his friend but because he himself was involved. That was it, the true reason, and between his anger and constant questioning he felt his high lifting, the drug rapidly losing its effect. But no matter what he said, she dodged; even the threatening tone of his voice effected nothing. She wasn't afraid now, he saw, and it made him suddenly wary, afraid that she knew even more than he suspected. The threat to himself was explicit now, clear, and his eyes went to the clock; a moment later he said, "I've got to be running along. I've got something to do."

"You've got to go?" Her voice was filled with disbelief.

"Yeah, I've got to do something important for my sake and yours." He couldn't explain, and stood up, feeling that he wanted to run. He expected her to protest but she didn't. Instead, she went to the door with him. On the dark landing they faced each other. He knew then that she was waiting to be kissed, and he kissed her, embracing her for a moment. Oddly, neither of them spoke, but as they withdrew from each other he saw that strange searching look in her eyes once more. He turned away and almost ran down the stairs.

chapter 13

TO ESCAPE BACK into that other phantom world whose portals yawned, ever-widening, for him; this was his wish now. The discussion with China and the tension it engendered left a problem he could not face—to tell or not tell of his habit, to have her or lose her, to face himself or turn away, back to that ever-expanding universe of fantasy and dream where all things were equated by the white drug's magic power.

It was dark now, the streets crowded, the air burdened and sullen with the gathering humidity, split with a thousand piercing cries that rose from the crowded district. As he walked along, Chico heard them all, a galvanic mixture of music, sighs, voluble streams of words and the din of traffic all expanding in his head. The lights brightening in windows and stores, the intricate and almost patterned surge of motor and pedestrian movement—all were unreal, at least beyond reach—part of the Puerto Rican ghetto rumbling to life again after the reasonable passive siesta of a summer day. He heard it, saw it all and smelled it—his own world which he didn't want, the new wall-less prison of a mixed people, light and dark and a dozen disputable shades, a confused people suddenly brought face to face with the issue of color, doubtful of where they stood and fearful of a skin with too dark a tint or hair with a tendency to crinkle, already dividing among themselves because of this, drawing the line, the older "immigrants" resenting the new, the Marine Tigers just off the banana boat, though

the banana boat had become a swift, thundering plane that plunged them all into the boiling cauldron of the city.

Supper hour was over but the women were still coming home from the factories, the men from restaurants, hotels, all the menial jobs allotted to the unskilled and unwanted. They passed Chico in the street or he heard their voices flowing from countless windows—and resented them. There were others already gathered in the bars, sitting on stoops or standing at corners—all men. His eyes sought each group, knowing those with dubious income, a pimp, a numbers man, a gambler, and those with no income at all.

Turning a corner, he came upon a group of younger men and women playing ball on the sidewalk. The men were barefoot, their voices loud. They spoke only Spanish, but he would have known anyhow that they were recent arrivals—Marine Tigers—for only newcomers would play ball barefooted in the street. It was they, he thought, who gave all of them a bad name, he who once had run barefoot always. "No wonder the others think we're from the jungle," he told himself and sneered at these newer arrivals.

He was passing a candy store when a man suddenly hailed him and he stopped. The man was smiling, white teeth showing in a soft tanned face, dark liquid eyes luminous with too much drink. His father—not the man who now lived with his mother, but his real father whom he had not set eyes on in many months. He approached Chico and greeted him once more, then surveyed him with obvious pride; part of this was real, part a result of the liquor in his brain. Still drinking, Chico thought, remembering that this had been the cause of his leaving, and he stood with an air of aloofness, not needing him now, not caring, either. Three years had passed since his father had left them. His drinking had led him to other women; the other women, of course, had caused trouble when Chico's mother found out about them. Violence followed, was inevitable with his temper. Chico remembered the last fight and how Paulie had thrown him out of the house.

"You're getting big, boy. I hardly knew you!"

Chico nodded, almost smiled. For a moment he wished that his father was back with them; nothing had been the same since he'd left, and the two of them had always gotten along. It was the fights with his mother that had caused the disruption, the beatings he gave her, and the arguments with Paulie, who in-

tervened and finally threw him out. But that was over and done with now, his father wasn't coming back. Not while he lived with another woman; he'd had a child by her, too, Chico knew. But that was his own business, no one else's. Still, he felt uneasy, and when this father asked him how his mother was, he barely nodded his head, then took leave of him, walking away abruptly, thinking, He didn't ask about Paulie, though. Never did, either, whenever they met. Paulie had given him a terrible beating that last night.

Nor could Chico mention at home that he had met his father; his mother had made it plain enough that she considered him dead and no one ever spoke of him in the house any more. "I guess he is dead, too," Chico told himself, "as far as I'm concerned." But his father was still his father, no matter what he did, how much he drank and how many women he chased. His father and not that little runt who lived with them now—his stepfather, the one who had taken his father's place, or supposedly had. Bad as his father was, his stepfather was worse, with his airs and wild clothes—like all the rest of the Marine Tigers. He thought he was somebody when he was nothing but a pot wrestler in a downtown restaurant and hardly able to speak English. At least he didn't use it in the house.

"Yeah, it's always Spanish with him, like he thinks he's back in Puerto Rico," Chico told himself. "That's the trouble with all of them, they don't want to learn. They've got to keep yakking in Spanish all the time so that other people think they're talking about them. No wonder everyone's against us!"

But he had more than this against his stepfather, much more. The man was an intruder sleeping in his mother's room. What made it worse, though, was the fact that this person who was now this stepfather had once been a roomer; they had taken him in soon after he had come from Puerto Rico, taken him in the way so many other families had done with others, not because they were greedy—not even because they felt sorry for one of their own kind, but out of sheer necessity so they could survive. It was the same with countless families in the neighborhood. But Chico's family had never done this before, not while his father lived with them. It was a point of pride with them, too, and something his father used to boast about, that no roomer (he meant male roomer) would

live with them while he still breathed. It was the one promise he'd kept, too. But after he left everything changed. Chico's mother wasn't working at the time and Paulie hadn't been able to find a job, that was how it happened that they took in the roomer. Chico resented him from the beginning, Paulie seemed indifferent; only their mother was grateful.

The roomer came and went quietly for more than a year. What he did and where he went was a mystery; his source of income was a mystery, too. "He dresses like a pimp and he looks like one," Chico would say over the table to Paulie. "He's really weird." Paulie would laugh; he had his own opinion of what their roomer did for a living, but Chico's words irritated his mother; he didn't know why because he never was around enough to know what was happening, never suspected that she'd see anything in this person to decide to "marry" him.

That was the greatest shock of all; the day when she told him, he didn't believe her at first. It couldn't possibly be true. When he realized that it wasn't a joke, he shouted, "Put a!" in his mother's face and wanted to spit at her and strike her. It was the only time he'd ever felt that way toward her, the emotion so strong in him that he had to run from the house in fear of his own anger. But greater yet was his confusion and injured pride, for the whole thing was unacceptable to him. Better to have a father who drank and chased women, or no father at all, than to have someone like this—a runt who didn't even seem like a man, a real greenhorn, and worse still, one too dark of skin. Not that he, Chico, held that against him but it meant they, as a family, were doomed to remain in this ghetto. Beyond the walls of their own world this man's dubious color would cause doors to be slammed in all their faces. Furthermore, it wasn't a "real" marriage, for his mother had no divorce, a common enough phenomenon in the "district," but still something to brand one and hurt one's pride.

Other mothers did that, even Angel's mother had taken another man, one who roomed with them, and suddenly announced to her son that this was his new father. But his, Chico's, mother? She was above that, it would never happen, he believed, and when it did, because he understood part of what it meant and could neither change it nor face it, he ran from the house. He was gone for two days and nights, days

in which he wandered the city, nights sleeping on a rooftop, curled on a flattened cardboard box. On the third evening hunger brought him back. He was waiting for his mother when she returned from work. He was still angry, still hurt, but he said nothing, for it was done now. And she, in turn, said nothing, knowing he was ashamed of her. She had done nothing to find him during his two-day absence, bowing to her new husband, who advised that her son would come back when he got hungry. She'd fed him then, it was simpler to do that than explain what she had done. Explanations could come later, she thought, but they never did, not that night or any other. He got up from the table as soon as he finished eating and left before his stepfather arrived.

On other, later occasions when his mother tried to speak of this, he quickly shut her up. Yet he stayed with her, not because he accepted the situation but because he felt he had the right inasmuch as his mother provided for him—not his stepfather, whom he more or less ignored. Each avoided the other, that way lessening tension. In a sense, it was Paulie, his brother, who partly replaced his father, and on the same level, because Paulie was big enough to whip him.

Reaching the house at last, he stopped at the stoop. He didn't feel like going up, but no other place attracted him and there was no one he cared to see, not even Angel. During his walk the night had deepened, the sky a dark blue bowl now where the first stars spun out their fragile light in faint, sterile pulsings. The wind from the river brought a welcome coolness through the streets after the day's sullen and smoldering lassitude, giving a renewed energy to everything. The clamor of the city increased, a vast movement; a turmoil and excitement of promiscuous and involved design—the noise at moments like music, high-pitched and feverish, then a deep undercurrent almost lost beneath the sharper sounds arrowing through the air, yet always there, thin-threaded or suddenly expanding, a threat to Chico as he listened, the real voice of the city crying out its pain and despair and frightening him with half-understood meanings.

A back-firing car startled him and he went inside; as the door closed behind him the sounds died, cut off as if they no longer existed. He went up the stairs, recalling the meeting with his father and missing him now, feeling a hollowness in-

side himself. Remembering his father's odd way of laughing, and his special dream—to own a bakery. The one thing he had always talked about at the table over and over again, saying how some day he would have a shop of his own and be the baker, while Paulie worked behind the counter and Chico would help with the baking. They'd all be rich then, but the bakery shop had never materialized, nor anything else. Paulie's dream of it had faded, too. Nights in bed they'd often discussed it and then one night Paulie came in and, when Chico broached the subject, he turned on him and said, "Shut up, there's not going to be any bakery. There never was going to be one!" They never spoke of it again.

As for his mother . . . but he had reached his own landing now; he paused before the door, the stifling heat of the hall swimming around his head, his own door half open and the light on inside. As he came in, he saw his mother sitting in the kitchen, still dressed in her street clothes. He was struck by the look on her face, as if she were in pain.

"What happened?" he said, staring at her.

"Nothing, I just worked late and I'm tired." She was on her feet already and the look of pain was gone but she couldn't conceal her weariness.

"What do you have to work late for?" Chico asked. "Do you want to kill yourself?"

The words brought a smile to her lips. "You'll understand later on," she said, and moved toward him. "Hungry?"

"No."

"Then you ate?"

"No."

"Then you're hungry." She moved to pass him and he stopped her with his arm, asking her where she was going. "To the stores, I'll be back."

"Sit ^{down} and rest, I'll go for you."

"I know, but you don't know how to buy. Let me go, and you wait, don't leave. You're always running out of the house. You're never home any more. Stay home tonight."

The plea in her voice reached deep inside him, dissolving the unreasoning rebellion he felt. The weariness in her face touched him as never before. "You shouldn't work," he said, almost choking on his words. "You shouldn't have to work for nobody."

For the first time in many days he'd come out of his shell to be, if only momentarily, his real self again, the son she really knew instead of the puzzling boy who seemed to be always escaping her of late. She smiled once more and patted his face. "So many things people should not have to do, but they do them," she said. "You'll find out some day. But it doesn't matter, and I don't mind working."

"But you work too hard," he answered, and wanted to say more, explain to her things that suddenly were beyond his tongue's reach. A surge of warmth and feeling and a desire to remake her life rose within him like a physical force, a tremendous wave that clogged his chest with a kind of ecstatic pain and filled his eyes with tears—and then was gone. The bright vision of a new life eluded his grasp, he could no longer see it, nor explain, not knowing it was in truth a fading desire that could never be fulfilled.

When he remained silent, his mother suddenly brushed past him. No matter what her feelings were, there were things to buy, work to do and no one else to do this but her. Even her sickness did not matter, the family was her first consideration. Nothing could keep her from doing what must be done. As her steps faded on the stairs, Chico realized this and saw her life as an endless round of uncompensated work, and thought: She's up at six and makes breakfast, goes to work, comes home, and then has to cook and wash and she's sick, too, and tired. She needs an operation. Fear and anger entwined now, for he was afraid of losing her and angry because of the unfairness of all she had to endure, but there was nothing he could do, no way out. She was trapped and he was, too, inextricably caught in something so big that he was terrified and forced to turn away from these thoughts.

When his mother returned with the food for the evening meal, she found him in the living room, lost in the music that came from the radio. When supper was ready and she called him, he was asleep and didn't want to get up. Once she roused him, he was a different person, so hostile that she was amazed by the change in him. But she said nothing, afraid to speak, yet wondered what was wrong, and worried when he left abruptly without saying where he was going, nor answering when she called after him to ask what time he was coming home.

chapter 14

TWO EVENINGS LATER

he was high in the street, not stoned but too high to be able to conceal it, when he ran into China. They saw each other at the same moment and he wanted to escape; he even attempted to pass her by, pretending he didn't notice her, but she called and he came over, thinking, What does she want to talk to me about? Damn, I should have taken another block.

"Hello!" she said, greeting him with a questioning look.

"Hello," he said, and suddenly felt he'd lost the power of speech, wanting to conceal his condition by "blinding" her with words and unable to. They were all inside and wouldn't come out. She asked him what was wrong, wasn't he glad to see her?

"Yeah, you know that," he said, at the same time thinking of what he had to say next to allay her suspicions, and unable to find the words. Again she asked what was wrong.

"Nothing!" he answered loudly.

"You don't have to holler."

"Who's hollering?"

"You are."

"I'm not hollering. Watch your own mouth," he said, not realizing that he'd raised his voice. The sharpness of her tone irritated him.

"Who are you talking to like that?" she said.

"You, China. Who'd you think?"

With that she began to cry, surprising him but not lessening his anger. Between her sobs, she said she was going to quit him. "So who cares?" he answered and started to walk away. Immediately he thought, I shouldn't have done that, but she tried to go over my head, and that's something she ain't supposed to do. He turned around then, watching her as she walked slowly away. Forget it, I can find somebody else, he thought. I'll never see her again, but her day will come. Even as he was telling himself this, he realized he was wrong, and was about to go after her when she turned around to face him

and he stopped himself. Neither wanted to start toward the other now, both trying to sustain their pride, but Chico finally gave in. As he moved toward her, she came to meet him, her eyes holding his.

"I'm sorry," he said when they stood together again. "I'm not feeling good, I didn't know what I was saying."

"Are you using drugs?" Her words seemed to explode in his head and he wanted to strike her for having found him out, yet he'd been expecting this, it was inevitable, and suddenly he was calm. He didn't want to admit it and answered, "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Well, I've heard rumors going around," she said.

"And you believe them—instead of me?" He tried to appear hurt now, and for the moment she believed him again—but she wanted to believe him and was ready to seize on anything. She couldn't speak because of the doubt that still remained in her mind.

"Well," he said when China didn't answer, "you believe them?"

"No, it's not that, but it's going all around the neighborhood and I didn't know what to think."

"Believe in what I'm telling you, I'm not using drugs."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. In the first place, I wouldn't be taking stuff, and in the second place, I love you too much," he said, breaking into a smile. He was feeling his high again, confident now that she really believed him.

Only she didn't, not underneath; again she saw that he wasn't himself and had never been like this before. He wasn't even Chico now, but a stranger who almost frightened her. "Then why did you try to avoid me?" she finally asked.

"Avoid you? What do you mean?"

Their meeting, his odd behavior, the other occasions when his actions had puzzled her—these all came clear to her now and, staring at him, she drew back a little. "You know what I mean, Chico. You're using dope."

The directness of the accusation stung, but the sharpness of her voice disturbed him more. "Damn, don't scream," he warned. "Do you want everybody in on this?"

"I didn't scream, but what are you afraid of?"

"Nothing, except this is between us, so keep it that way."

"Then you do take dope."

"I didn't say that, did I?"

"You don't have to. It's the way you act, the way you've changed. It couldn't be anything else."

That's strictly my business, he wanted to shout. But he was unable to speak, for the sound of her voice, and not the accusation, roused his anger so that he couldn't think the way he wanted to, nor answer in his own defense. No words would come, everything blurred in his numbed brain. He was aware of this as it took place and he fought for control, but China was still talking. He couldn't hear her now, only saw her lips moving and that look in her eyes that told more than any words could ever tell. But it was none of her business, no one's business, and who was she to tell him off? Who was she to say anything at all? But this was wrong, he had no right to be thinking like this when she could help him, and didn't he want her help? Hadn't he gone to her time and again with the intention of declaring himself so that she would give him strength to kick his habit? Help was one thing, but this wasn't it, not when she looked at him like that, and said what she'd said, that only fired his anger. He held onto himself, afraid of his own violence, recalling an incident which had happened a year before when another girl had upset him by screaming for the police after she had led him on. That time, without wanting to, and without thinking, he had struck the girl and knocked her down an area-way, then threw a garbage pail after her before he ran. But this was China, and he didn't want to hurt her; only she wouldn't stop staring, and then she said it once more, accusing him, and he couldn't hold back this time, couldn't stop his hand. It came up suddenly and struck her hard across the mouth, silencing her. Then, because he was ashamed of himself, he turned and walked away.

chapter 15

AN HOUR LATER Chico left the park where he'd gone to nod off by himself on a bench. Down from his high now, he was restless again, walking the

streets with no goal in mind, the incident with China far from his thoughts, deliberately shut out, for he didn't want to dwell on it. Except for the heat, it was like any other night; everyone seemed to be in the streets, women gossiping, men playing cards and drinking beer, kids running around, groups of them shouting and splashing in the water pouring from open hydrants while the older ones sported their colorful club jackets in spite of the heat, stood on corners, under street lamps and outside the poolrooms. All the while the hot moist air carried its burden of sound, the gossip, loud talk, music from windows and radio stores, the violent words of men with too much beer in them; arguing over cards. The heat served to extend the carnival, giving it greater life, but like all nights it had to end, the children going upstairs first, the women next, finally the men, till the streets were empty. Chico's street was empty, too. Passing through it in search of Angel, he returned and found it so desolate and quiet he was struck by it and wondered what had happened. He thought of the morning to come, seeing the blaze of day and the street still dead, the whole neighborhood after the first clamoring of day stagnant till the sun began to set again.

But this night wasn't over yet, not for him, nor all the others in the crowded tenements; in a way, it was only beginning, for each house, each room, filled with stifling heat, would keep the wearied awake. And his own house, Chico knew, would be like all the rest, hot and sticky with no cooling breath from the river. In the past, on such nights, his father used to sleep on the fire escape—take his pillow and blanket and throw them down and lie upon them till morning—while he himself, lying in bed and unable to sleep, would listen to the night sounds, the soft diminishing purr of traffic, the rumblings of great trucks moving through the city, voices suddenly raised in argument, the inevitable violence which such nights induced. Rising from his bed then and, leaning upon the windowsill, he would gaze down at the empty street and wish for morning.

But now he had to find Angel. As he walked along, his thoughts returned to China and he realized he shouldn't have hit her. "What will I say to her tomorrow?" he asked himself. "How will I approach her? I'm not going to get high, I'll be straight from now on and excuse myself—but what will I say to her?"

He turned the corner, and walked to the poolroom first, but Angel wasn't there, nor in the near-by bar. He started for Angel's house.

Angel's block was quiet, deserted; cats were at the garbage pails, slinking in the shadows, their eyes suddenly lighting with green fire. Chico walked past them warily. A taxi turned the corner, passed him and sped away, allowing the quietness to close in again quickly. He was aware of his footsteps now, hard against the pavement, and his shadow walking ahead of him. He turned in at Angel's house, and went down below in the cellar, where he found Angel and some of the boys sitting and nodding.

"What's happening?" Chico said in greeting.

"I just got off, the three of us had a sixteenth and it was dynamite. But where were you hiding?" Angel asked.

Chico told all that had happened between China and himself.

"You slugged her?" Tito said in surprise. "Are you going off the broad, or you going to keep her yet?"

"Hell, man, he'll keep her now that she knows," Angel said. "After all, when he's sick, she can help him out."

"No, man, I don't go for that."

"I used to drain them till there was no more to drain, drain them dry," Angel bragged, and the others laughed. "Yeah, work her and get that bread. She's always looking for you to give her something, and you spend your money to take her to the cheap flicks. Don't be so self-conscious, man, just ask. If she loves you, she'll give."

"Yeah, I might as well sound her now that she knows I'm using the stuff. How much bread you got?"

"I've got two cents left. But why not go up to your broad's house and see what she's got to say, how much you can get? Maybe you can reach her. But you got to sound her first, come up on a slow hit like this: 'Look, baby, I'm sick and I need some money . . .'"

"Maybe I'll sound her that way," Chico said, and Angel stood up to put his jacket on. "I'll see you later," he told the others.

"Where're you going?" Tito asked.

"To get down again."

"What with?"

"Whatever I get, and I can't spare a taste this time, not

even the cotton." Angel followed Chico out of the room and they walked back toward China's house.

"Do you want me to go up with you?" Angel asked.

Chico hesitated, realizing the lateness of the hour, and finally shook his head. "I'm not going up."

"What's wrong with you? You got to sound her."

"Not this late. She's in bed by now and her old lady'll know something's wrong if I call."

"Yeah, that's right, you're right, man," Angel agreed. It wouldn't do to spoil this. Tomorrow or another day would do, but his hopes had been raised by the certainty of getting a free fix and he was greedy for the drug again. "So what do we do for it?" he said. "I'm coming down already."

"I thought that stuff was dynamite you had?" said Chico.

"It was, but I walked it off. I could use some more."

Chico hesitated, watching his friend; Angel wasn't down from his high yet, not all the way at least; Chico knew that, knew his habit, too, which was greater than his own. It was only his own that mattered, though, and the urge was on him now, the need to escape the night's fiasco. For China had found out at last—which was worse than if the whole world knew. If he had only gone to her and told her, he thought, begged her to help him, she would have understood, made him promise to stop. Even if he had admitted it tonight after she accused him, he might have saved himself but, instead, he'd dodged and lied and then struck her—like a real junkie would do. Yeah, she knew it now, no matter what he'd said. Maybe she knew it all along, but hitting her, that ended everything between them. She'd hate him, never want to see him again.

He couldn't face that at the moment, could never face it, he thought. He turned to Angel. "What are we going to do?"

"What do we always do?"

"Got anything lined up?"

"Nothing special. Let's just smell around and see."

That meant a mugging. Chico hesitated. When he was sick and desperate it wouldn't have mattered, but he wasn't sick now and his fear of getting caught was uppermost. The risk was great and Chico had a great fear of killing the victim, knowing the fate of muggers caught by the Law, the terrible, unmerciful beatings that would follow, the big fists, heavy shoes, sadistic rubber hoses that would hammer him to a pulp.

They drifted through the darker streets, on the lookout for

a victim, Chico growing more unnerved by the minute and hoping they'd fail in their search. The streets proved emptier than they expected, and the few night strollers met with were sober and wary.

"Man, it's a bad night," Angel finally said, and Chico, taking this as a cue, answered, "Let's quit it. We're wasting time."

"Punking out?" Angel stopped and grabbed him by the arm, suddenly angry.

"I'm just saying," Chico said, afraid, yet unable to admit his fear. But there was no way out. Angel wouldn't listen; he knew that and suddenly hated him, for it was Angel's idea.

His legs carried him on through another dark, empty street. As they neared the corner, a lone woman appeared. Angel alerted immediately. "A snatch!" he said. "Look how loose she swings that pocketbook. You take her, I'll cover."

Chico didn't want to attempt even this, but there wasn't time to argue. His lips had tightened and every step that carried him forward weighed on him; his feet were lead and his stomach seemed on fire. How fast am I going to run, and will I get it? he thought. Is there a cop around the corner, or will I slip and fall?

As he reached the woman, all this flashed through his mind again and he asked himself, "What's going to happen?" In that moment, Angel seeing him falter, yelled, "Go ahead!" He grabbed for the pocketbook, got it and began to run, in greater fear now, for the woman let out an ear-splitting shriek.

As he turned the corner, he was running fast, yet his legs felt anchored by a terrifying weight and his breath was already coming in burning gasps. Worst of all, and this had never happened before, he heard a kind of weird music which began softly and swelled louder and louder—the real source of his fear now—music that sounded as if it came from a church organ: it softened, faded, then rose to a high piercing shriek accompanied by a pain that he felt would tear the back of his head away. But at least he was escaping, and the woman's screams were fading. Her voice died out. Nothing existed now but his fear and the horrible music in his head which aggravated his terror, creating a lurid landscape within the dark walls of the city, trapping him anew like a rat in an inescapable maze.

He kept running. The deserted block stretched ahead of him, blurred because of the tears in his eyes. As he ran he thought, *Something's wrong* for it to be so empty, and he noticed a single light burning above the street. Somewhere a window lifted and he knew someone was watching his flight but he didn't look up, seeing only the dark street, the gloom of sleeping houses, and thinking of the lamp on the corner, believing that once he made it he'd be safe.

Angel was sitting on his stoop waiting. As Chico approached, he stood up. "Did we get enough to cop?"

"Yeah, but who do we cop from now?"

"I got a new boy, Ray. You want to go to his house?"

"I'll wait. You get it."

Angel laughed as he went off by himself. When he returned with the drug, they went up on the roof landing to shoot up. Angel nodded off immediately, hitting himself and banging it all in at once, then sat on the top step of the stairs with his head falling forward. Chico left him that way and sought the street with the intention of going home, but he never made it. Along the way, he stopped to sit down on a stoop, the high on him now. He was stoned as his eyes closed.

Later, not knowing what alerted him, he opened his eyes and saw a police car turn the corner. He didn't move, didn't want to, only watched it as it came on, slowly now, telling him they had spotted him. Slower and slower, until it seemed to be creeping toward him. At last it came to a dead stop; the spotlight flashed, blinding him with its glare.

"Hey, you, come here!" one policeman called. In that moment Chico remembered the marks on his arm and thought it was the end for him, felt numbed below the belt, his testicles shrinking until the whole of his belly was a frozen area of pain.

I'm going to make a break, they ain't got me yet, he thought, and stood up swaying, as if about to come to them. Instead, he ran onto the house and took the stairs toward the roof. The pain in his loins stabbed like a knife but he didn't stop. The door below opened as he reached the second flight and thunderous steps sounded on the stairs—then the music started up in his head, the organlike noise exploding and adding new terror to his flight. "Got to keep going," he

repeated to himself. The pain was so intense now that he wanted to throw himself down and give up, but the music, rising to a horrible shriek, sent him on toward the roof and escape.

Once out of the maze of rooftops, backyards and alleys, he stopped for a moment and knew he was safe. No more footsteps, no signs of the cops. Suddenly he felt a tremendous weight leaving him, a feeling of infinite relief, for now the weird screaming organ music was gone, too. But he couldn't stand here with the cops still looking for him. In a moment he was walking fast again, heading for home. When he reached the door, he was still breathing hard and he stopped in the hallway. It was dark there, the whole house so quiet that he paused at the foot of the stairs. He recalled what had happened—the crazy organ music he'd heard in his head. The dope inside me did that, he thought, and went on up the stairs.

chapter 16

HE SLEPT LATE the next day and got up at two. Someone knocked on the door a half-hour later and he allowed the caller to knock until he went away. Then he slept again and arose at four, washed, slicked his hair with oil, and hurried over to China's house.

When he knock'd she came to the door but only partly opened it, then tried to slam it shut in his face. He forced it open, saying, "I'm going to talk to you serious."

"I don't want to talk."

"Then listen, China. Let's go in the living room?"

She didn't answer, only looked at him. He grabbed her by the arm and took her to the living room. He had to set her down on the couch. "Look, about last night," he said, "I'm sorry I had to hit you. I was high, and I tried to duck you because I didn't want you to find out. It was something I didn't want you to ever know."

"And now I do."

"Yeah," he said, feeling her words. "But I go for you big," he went on, hoping to reach her that way. "Nobody else matters to me but you. Believe that, China."

"What difference does it make now?"

"I don't get you."

"Well, you've been taking dope, and . . ."

"But I haven't got a habit. I just started and I only snort."

"That's only the start. You'll end up like all the rest of them in the neighborhood."

"It won't ever get that far, that's if you stick with me and help me stop."

"I'll quit you if you don't stop."

"But I told you I was!" he protested. "I told you!"

"Well," she said, relenting, "you have to give me your word that you'll really stop, because if you don't, I really will quit you."

"Aw, China baby, all you have to do is give me the word and I'll stop as of this minute. I'll never touch it again, that's a real promise."

China hesitated, not knowing whether she could believe him or not, but she wanted to and, because she liked him so much, loved him in her child's way, she had to. Still, she hesitated. At last she said, "Well, I'll stick by you as long as you stop using it, but the very next time I see you high or even hear of it, you know what's going to happen—I'm going to call it quits."

Hearing this, he felt a tremendous sensation of relief and said to himself, "I'm going to slow down, I'm really going to kick it this time." He meant it, too. All the other times when he tried and failed didn't matter. This time it was for good. But he wanted to forget the discussion now. Both of them did.

"Put some records on," he said, and when the music began to play and China sat down, he began to talk about the future, how it was going to be different from now on, the places he'd take her, for he'd have money and it wouldn't go for dope any more but for her. "We'll go to all the dances around," he said, "and take a moonlight cruise, go to Coney Island. Say, how about the beach? I've been staying away too long."

China nodded and smiled—but was still in doubt. He wouldn't be telling me all that if he didn't mean it, she thought; he wouldn't lie. She believed him, her last doubt vanishing

when he proposed that they go to Coney Island the next afternoon. "We'll go early and lay around all day in the sun. Then at night we'll take in all the rides. What do you say?" he said, and she nodded her head, smiling, wishing that tomorrow was already here.

chapter 17

HIS MOTHER looked stunned when he walked in early that night. Her eyes were searching him, but he paid no attention, going into the living room. She followed him and, as he sat down and lit a cigarette, she moved close, watching him, but not saying anything. Ignoring her, he put the radio on; he was becoming irritated.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Can't I even come in and sit down without being stared at?"

"But you're home so early."

"So what? You complain when I don't come in, and when I do, it's the same. Let me be."

"Then you're all right?"

"Why, did I look sick or something coming in?"

"No, I was just surprised—and glad. When you're home, I know you're all right but, when you're out late, I worry about you. There's so many bad things happening, so many bad people around here. It's like everybody's crazy—and all the young ones, the things they're doing to themselves."

He knew what she meant—it was a direct allusion—and he stirred uncomfortably. He felt safe enough, but he was irritated by her talk and didn't want to listen, not now after he'd decided to break his habit. But perhaps she was hinting, perhaps she suspected.

"If we had a house in the country," she went on, "or any place but this neighborhood."

"Yeah, a house in the country." He laughed. "That's a dead dream. We'll never get out of this place. We'll die here."

His words hurt her. It was something she wanted to cling to, a bulwark that sustained her, and she didn't believe he was serious. "Some day we will, you'll see," she said. "We'll

live in a nice house, in a nice neighborhood. You'll see, when you're married, you'll want it like that."

"Now you're marrying me off, Mom. What next?"

"Oh, you will be. And I hope she'll be a nice girl."

"I have one now."

"The girl that was here that day?"

"Yeah, you never said anything about her. Didn't you like her?"

"I liked her face. I could see she's nice."

"She is. That's where I was tonight, at her house. And, Mom—we're going to the beach tomorrow, Coney Island, could you . . ."

"Give you some money?"

He grinned up at her and she went for her pocketbook. When she returned, he was listening to the music and feeling good now because he was home. Everything seemed fine again—but, as his mother handed him the money, he heard the front door open and his stepfather call out in Spanish. That alone was enough to spoil everything. His stepfather came into the room, talking loudly. Chico ignored him at first, but he couldn't listen to the music any more. He got up and went to his room.

Sitting on the bed, he listened to the sounds of evening breaking outside. The whole city seemed alive with noise, teeming with movement, but the hot room was almost like a prison. The night would be long, tomorrow had no horizon but sleep, if he could sleep, would bring it nearer; but he needed the drug for that.

He stood up, listening. He heard his mother and stepfather in the kitchen. They were arguing—about money most likely. Lately, it was always that, but he didn't care now. "A cap and a half," he told himself, "that's the limit." He kept his promise and then slept. The night moved slowly toward the grey cliffs of dawn.

Before morning, a gentle rain fell, barely moistening the parched streets. The distant grumbling that preceded the freshet had promised a downpour. Chico opened his eyes and lay awake. The darkness of his room was thick with silence now, for the rumbling had ceased. There was lightning, though, vivid flashes that scarred the sky and lit the room

with a fitful acetylene glare that made the intervals of darkness welcome.

For the lightning somehow seemed part of the broken dream he'd left behind—a streamlined version of the airplane trip when he'd flown from Puerto Rico. He saw the great silver-winged plane again and himself as a small boy, crying because he didn't want to go aboard it. Saw the crowd, too, that had gathered at the field, then the plane heading north, the ocean below, blue as the sky, a ship painted red and white, no more than a toy in size, and some of the passengers in the plane still crying. Then Miami—sleeping on a bench and not eating because his aunt who was taking him north had no money. The plane roared into the sky again, and he saw the fabled city which had drawn them like moths to a flame—New York from the sky.

The joy and excitement had soon enough changed to confusion and fear once the great plane grounded at the airport. Chico smiled to himself now, but he hadn't then, for neither he nor his aunt knew where to go. They were lost and bewildered in those first moments of excitement and didn't know which way to turn for help, searching the crowd of faces for those who should have been there to meet them.

Now he wondered if he were still lost, for from that day on it seemed he had been searching for something which he had never found—never would find, either. Lightning ripped the sky then, a series of jagged flashes that ignited the whole dark ugly underbelly of cloud, the uglier wet walls of the city and those of Chico's room, bare as a prison cell, barer and closer. When the glare withdrew and the dark sprang back he was thankful. After that there were only brief flashes and lesser grumblings that finally faded altogether as the storm center passed out to sea.

In this new silence the rain began to whisper, then fell harder for several minutes in a final downpour. He recalled that other island again from which he'd come so long ago, and another night long forgotten, when a hurricane had struck. The palms had begun shaking, then the wind rose, but even before that he ran for home. He found it already nailed shut and no one there. By then sheets of tin were flying from rooftops and the rain was coming down, the streets were empty and unlit, bats flying about crazily. One, dashed against him by the wind, clung to his shirt and he couldn't rid himself of

it until he ripped his whole shirt off. He ran. The street was full of water now, and he was cold, his shoes lost, his pants torn, but he saw a light in the house where his grandmother lived. Up ahead a flying sheet of tin from a rooftop found a victim in the dark. Chico heard a piercing scream and a splash, and found a man groaning, half his face sliced off and blood pouring like water from him. He ran in terror and, reaching the house at last, he walked in. His grandmother thought him a spirit returned from the dead. Everyone there knelt on the floor. "Grandma, what are you doing, I'm not dead," he said. "Look, touch me, I'm real," and touching him where his arm was scratched, the old woman found blood on her fingers. "Oh, thank God!" she cried—and the storm passed over.

Outside, the rain had stopped, and a dead silence lay upon the city, a thick, threatening pall of darkness. Chico closed his eyes and went back to sleep again. He awoke to the white incandescent glare of early afternoon.

He was out of bed in an instant, cursing himself for rising so late. China would be waiting. Yes, she'd wait but she'd be wondering, he told himself, and hurried down the stairs. Angel was sitting on the stoop.

"What happened?" Angel said. "You trying to duck me?" There was an ugly look in his eyes, an edge to his voice that Chico didn't like.

"Duck who? What are you jiving about?" he said.

"You didn't answer and I near kicked the door down. Now you come flying out, thinking I'm gone."

"Hell, I didn't know you knocked. I just got up."

"So where're you going so early and all slicked up?"

"I'm taking China to Coney Island."

Angel whacked his thighs and laughed. "Well, kiss my little sister. You mean to say you're going to spend your dough on a girl instead of buying stuff?"

"I'm taking her to the beach, that's all."

"Yeah, and last night you were going to knock her down for money. What happened? I thought you were my buddy?"

"Who said I wasn't?"

"Well, you're acting that way. Man, come on, forget the bitch and we'll go to my pad."

"Lay off that bitch stuff, brother. You're talking about my

girl, not a whore, understand? Even you can't talk like that."

Angel looked up in surprise. "Okay, I'm sorry, man, but don't get hot with me, cause you're too thin."

"So I'll still fight you. You don't scare me."

"Maybe not, but I might beat you flat to the deck."

They were on the edge of something that had stood between them for a long time, something which both of them didn't quite understand. More than China was involved. Angel harbored a desire that never quite shaped itself, a dangerous feeling asserting itself in a confused and complicated anger that made him want to strike at Chico. He held onto himself, as he always did, knowing that his anger would destroy the very thing he wanted.

"Let's drop it, we're going nowhere fast. Are we buddies yet?" he asked.

"Whatever you say."

"Okay, it's forgotten."

They touched hands, concluding their differences, and each went his way. Angel shuffling off in search of someone else to join him in getting high, while Chico walked toward China's house.

On the way, he met Carmen. She had disappeared weeks ago and looked like a ghost now, sallow and thin and not dressed too well, her sloe-eyes expressionless.

She was about to pass him by and he grabbed her by the arm.

"Hey, waere've you been?" he said.

Guided by his hand, she swung around like a mechanized doll, lifted her eyes. She looked at him, displaying no signs of emotion or recognition.

"Where've you been?" Chico asked again.

"No place."

"No place, hell. I know you better. Did the cops pick you up?"

"No."

"Then maybe you've been trying to beat the habit."

"What for?" she answered calmly. "I like the stuff too much, you know that."

He almost smiled. Yeah, she liked the stuff, all right. She'd started him using the needle. A real junkie girl if he'd ever know'd one, and she sold the stuff, too, for a bigger push

whose name she'd never tell. Maybe she'd held out on him and left home.

"You were out of town?" he asked.

"Not exactly." She spoke dully. "I've been around, but not in the neighborhood.

"And now you're back?"

"Yeah."

"For good?"

"There's no such thing." She said this flatly, as if accepting the finality of the statement. It struck him forcefully, making him wonder. And yet she'd always been like this, as if long ago something had been ripped out of her, a vital part which made her different from anyone he'd ever known, without perceptible feelings, willing to accept any knock and return for more. It was this in her that he hated more than anything, and yet it held a fascination for him which he couldn't resist. It was like a challenge; there'd been times in the past when he tried to destroy it by making her cry. To do that he had had to hurt her—but he never succeeded in so much as making her wince. Even now he felt the challenge, but there wasn't time. He had to be on his way.

Yet she held him there with her eyes. "Do you want to go up to the house?" she said. "Nobody's home."

"I'm busy," he answered. "Some other time."

"You mean you're off it?"

"Yeah, off it, I'm kicking it."

"Then you're the first I ever heard of."

"Well, there's always a first."

"Too bad, cause I've got some real stuff, almost pure."

"Yeah, how did you manage that?" he said, curious and stirred now. She answered with an indifferent shrug. Her source of supply she had always kept secret.

"Well," he said again, "I've got to go." He watched her eyes, not moving, and she looked back at him as if she knew his thoughts. A pale ugly bitch with more bone than meat and subdued but definite negroid features, yet possessing something that stirred him anew—and always willing to give whatever he wanted. She was waiting for him to leave now, expecting him to go, but she'd see him again, he'd be around so long as she was, for she knew what he didn't know, that he couldn't break his habit.

Chico looked at her for a long moment. As much as he

wanted to, he couldn't leave. "Let's go," he said. "What I've got to do can wait." It was a crazy thing to say but he didn't care now.

They walked toward her house, not speaking, hurrying because he wanted to hurry.

The ritual of taking off was over and the drug was in his head. He'd hit up first, and now, with eyes grown small, he watched Carmen. Sullenly she went about it, her eyes like a cat's and her slender fingers expert. He'd always liked to watch her do herself up, the cool manner in which she worked, without hurrying and never nervous or greedy, yet quicker than he. In the dim room with the shades almost fully drawn, her pallor seemed almost gone, the shadows softening her features. Profiled against the window, standing quite still at the moment after she put the spike in her arm, she appeared to him like a statue, her features almost oriental now, perfectly carved and expressing an infinite calm that was almost trance-like.

The room grew dimmer then, its walls receded, the drug moving through his blood made his eyes heavy and he fought to keep them open, to hold the image. She was no longer an ugly bitch. Yeah, she's different, he thought; maybe I never noticed before, or maybe it's the light. He looked at her more intently but found no flaw.

She turned and came to the bed and sat down beside him. "You know, this is the first time I really noticed you," he said. She turned her head slowly, to stare at him. She was neither smiling nor speaking. "I looked for you," he went on, lying now, "I missed you. Did you get busted? I was worried."

She knew he was lying, but she didn't mind. "I was in a different neighborhood with a fellow, running around with him for a while, and now I'm back." She spoke slowly in a soft voice, as if she had memorized the words. He didn't believe her explanation at all, but that didn't matter now. Only one thing mattered. He didn't speak, waiting instead, until at last she said, "I know you're thinking about it to yourself, and you don't have to con me to get it."

"Then let's go," he said, getting up. The light seemed suddenly dimmer, the room starkly naked, harsh. "We need some music," he said.

She had already thought of that and walked away. Before

she returned he heard the radio go on softly and barely heard the music. Then she appeared in the doorway and stared across the room at him as if about to say something, but she didn't speak. He was ready and sat down to wait. Coming into the room, she began to undress as if alone, taking her time, removing each garment and folding it neatly before laying it down. She moved as if she were in a trance. And he watched, hearing the music from afar, aware of the dim light in the room as it touched each newly revealed portion of her body and feeling no real urge now.

She came toward him then, completely naked, slender as a young boy, her small hard breasts barely trembling, her stomach hollowed as if she had drawn her breath in, but the last was illusion and he knew it, he could tell by the blandness of her face and eyes. She stood before him now and said, in the same flat voice she always used, "I'm ready." Still, he felt no real urge, but roused himself and stood up.

A moment later, as inert as a stone, she lay beneath him and the wish to hurt her came back, giving force to his efforts, but his almost savage and unceasing attack brought no response. Her face remained a mask, her eyes reflected nothing and, for him, the final moment came in a single, almost unfelt spasm that left him, like a broken bow above her listless body.

chapter 18

THREE DAYS PASSED before Chico saw China again. He needed an excuse, and on the way to her house decided to tell her he'd been sick. That would cover everything, he thought, yet he wondered if she'd believe him now. So many lies he'd told already, but to tell her the truth was out of the question.

She answered his knock, then stepped back and surveyed him as if he were a stranger.

"What's wrong?" he asked, not realizing how he looked.

"Well, aren't you something."

"Why?"

She didn't answer. He followed her into the living room and met her face to face.

"You did me a rotten deal," she said. "You stood me up."

"Now wait a minute. Let me explain," he said quickly.

"Go ahead and explain."

"Well, I had trouble with my throat. I've been in the house all the time, in bed. I was really sick bad."

Watching him, she didn't answer. For a moment he thought she believed him. Then she said, "It's funny that you didn't answer when I came to your house. I called twice, you know. What have you to say to that?"

"When?" He shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe I was sleeping then, or listening to some music. Now that you mention it, I did think I heard somebody knock but, when I went to the door and nobody was there, I figured it was my imagination. You know if I knew it was you, I'd have answered, don't you?"

She stared at him for some moments before she could bring herself to answer, wanting to believe him but doubting his words. He'd lied to her before and he'd lie again. She knew that now and realized what the drug had done to him. But he did look unwell and it was possible that he really had been sick. Besides, why would he keep me out, she thought. I guess I just didn't knock loud enough," she said.

"I wish you had," said Chico, "nothing easier now. I missed you."

"I missed you."

"And we never went to the beach."

"Well, there's time."

"I'll make it up, honest. Chico. We'll go to all the places we spoke about. That's a promise." He meant this, too, but he was without money and couldn't specify a date. He didn't want to commit himself either and couldn't afford to, for fear the same thing would happen again. Trying to dodge the issue, he said, "I haven't any money or we could go this Saturday to Coney Island."

"Oh, it doesn't matter. I'd rather go to a movie."

"If I have the money . . ."

"Will you please stop talking about money? We don't have to go any place, you know."

"I know," he said. "It's just that I want to take you all over and I can't right now."

"So it won't be right now. Who cares? I only want one thing anyhow, and you know what I mean."

He knew, and nodded his head, suddenly feeling guilty because of the way she looked at him.

"You haven't touched it, have you?" she asked.

"Why, do you think I have?"

"I only asked."

"I gave you my word, didn't I? Don't you trust me?"

"I do, but . . ."

"But what?"

"I don't know. I just don't want anything to happen to you. I don't want you to be like the others. Look at what's happened around here since dope started coming into the neighborhood."

"It's still the same old neighborhood."

"No, it's not. It's crazy now. I wish I lived some place else far away."

"Then you wouldn't hear me."

"I mean both of us."

"I know what you mean," he said, and moved closer to her, for a moment touching her together in some nebulous place. Yet this couldn't be, never would be, something told him. He tried to deny it by taking hold of her. That way he felt safe, safe of himself, just the two of them together. Momentarily, he released his idea and then released her suddenly, surprising her.

"What's the matter?" she said.

"Nothing."

"Then why let me go like that?"

"I thought I heard someone coming," he said.

"But it's early yet."

He knew then what she meant, but oddly, he didn't want her now, not that way anyhow. Just to talk to her was enough. That was all he wanted, at the moment he needed now.

And she in some way sensed this, feeling the change in him. And it wasn't because he'd been sick.

"There's something wrong," she said. "And you know it. Why don't you tell me?"

"Look, do we have to keep playing the same record?" he answered, irritated because she continued to probe and he didn't want that. It was always the same, and would always be; every time he saw her it came back to that and she didn't

help by asking questions and being suspicious. Suddenly, he realized that she hadn't meant dope but had referred to his unexpected withdrawal—and he hadn't understood that himself; it was almost a mechanical gesture. But she'd expected more, even inviting him by saying, "It's early yet." That's it, he thought, and knew he could change everything by simply acting as he used to act. For the moment he was inclined, but it was only an inclination, no fierce thirst of desire, then that died, too, and he remembered all the talk he'd heard about the drug, what it did to one—which he didn't quite believe. But there was more to it than that. It had something to do with Carmen, and with himself, he believed, that other part of him which made him unworthy of China. He was unworthy of her now and didn't want to touch her. But to explain this was impossible. She wouldn't understand nor believe him, he thought. Anyway, he didn't feel like talking about it.

She surprised him then by saying, "Is there someone else?"

Thinking she knew about Carmen, he flushed. "What made you say that?"

"I just wanted to know."

"There's no one else."

"Then maybe you're tired of me."

"Don't say that."

"I did say it."

"Why?"

"Because of the way you're acting. Is it because you got what you wanted?"

"No, you know that. But . . ."

"What?"

"Maybe it was wrong. I don't know; I wanted you and I didn't. I don't know how to explain it exactly. In a way, it was like spoiling something I wanted to keep."

"Don't say that, Chico."

"Well, that's the way it is."

"Then you don't want me any more?"

"I didn't say that. It's too hard to explain. Oh, I don't know what I'm saying. Everything is crazy, the whole world." He felt confused now and wanted to escape, for the more he talked the more confusing everything seemed to get. If I were high now, it wouldn't be like this, he thought. I'd know all the answers.

But he couldn't allow her to see him that way again, for she knew the telltale signs, and wouldn't understand. She didn't realize he couldn't cold turkey it. Nobody could. Such thinking angered him, but the desire to have the drug was uppermost in his mind now and it made him restless. He wanted to be away from her, any place but here. If he stayed, he might lose his head and strike her, for nothing was coming out right. All they had done was argue, skirting the edge of something explosive; more words would only set off the fuse and he didn't want this to happen. If it did, he sensed it would be the end.

Suddenly he stood up. It was better to leave now. She stared at him, surprised by his action.

"Now what?" she said. "Are you angry?"

"No, I'm not feeling well. I guess I shouldn't have come out. I wasn't supposed to."

"Oh," she said. There was a tone of doubt in her voice as if she didn't believe him. But it was more than that. A jumble of thoughts and opposing feelings confused her. Yet he knew one thing: he was not the same, but someone else whom she didn't quite know. He even appeared different—detached, out of reach. This was perfectly clear now but she didn't want to accept it. She couldn't.

"Chico," she said, and stopped.

"What?"

"Please take care of yourself."

"You know I will."

"I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"I don't know, I'm just afraid."

He knew what she meant, even though she didn't say it, and this time it didn't bother him. It would take a little time and he'd kick his habit. Then she'd quit harping. But even as he was thinking of this, the other part of him was making its demands and he knew perfectly well that he was lying to himself. It was as simple as that, for the pattern was set already and, with ease, he could say one thing at one moment and deny it in the next without conflict. It didn't occur to him that he had already yielded. It was more convenient to believe he was lying in order to allay China's unwanted suspicions.

But her looking at him that way made him uneasy and he turned to go. "I'll see you," he said.

"When?"

"I don't know, but I'll be around."

She went with him to the door and opened it. An odor coming up from the hall almost nauseated him.

"Gee, you are sick," she said.

"What's that stink?" He felt he was about to vomit.

"Only someone cooking. Does that bother you?"

"Yes, I can't stand here." He started away from her and she called. "What do you want?" he asked, turning around. But he realized why she had called and came back to her, to kiss her abruptly and with no feeling; then he ran down the stairs.

chapter 19

NO SOONER had he arrived home and closed the door than footsteps sounded on the stairs. Chico listened, holding his breath. The footsteps came on up and stopped. Someone tapped on the door, then a kick shook the panels.

"Who is it?" Chico asked.

"Open up."

It was Angel's voice. Chico opened the door and Angel came in, sweating and obviously sick.

"What's the matter, don't you know how to knock any more?" Chico asked.

"Man, I called you in the street and you kept on going. You weren't going to open the door, either."

"Not when I didn't know who it was."

"Maybe you did know. What are you doing, holding out on me?"

Chico flushed. "You know better than that," he lied.

"Then you haven't got any jive?"

"No, and I need some."

"Jesus, I'm sick and I thought you had something the way

you were walking." Angel stared at him, suspiciously now. "Where were you coming from?" he finally asked.

"I was up to see China."

"Did you get anything from her?"

"Like what?"

"Money."

"Nay, it was just a visit."

"I thought you were going to con her? Ask her some bread and we both can be high."

"Can't," said Chico, yet he felt the moment had come. And everyone else did it. Besides, it would be easy.

"Why can't you?" Angel said.

"Because I told her I was sick," Chico explained largely.

"What will she think if I bounce back in?"

"Sick in what way?"

"Real sick. That's why I told her I wasn't around."

"And she believed you?"

"Naturally."

"Then go back and tell her you have to have money for medicine. Swing her that way."

Chico hesitated.

"What do you think a bread is for?" Angel said. "Or ain't you a man?"

It was a challenge he couldn't refuse. Besides, the time had come. His need was on him and there was no way out. As he got up to go, Angel said, "I'll wait for you here."

In front of China's house, Chico stopped and almost turned back. Then went up the steps and climbed the long flights of stairs to her door. There he hesitated again, saying to himself, "I have no right to do this. This is the worst yet. I'm really low." But the habit was making its demands, and he was afraid of getting sick. He knocked then and waited, beginning to sweat when no one answered and no sound came from within the house. About to knock again, he heard footsteps far below and peered down over the landing rail.

It was China. Midway up the last flight she recognized him. "Chico, what are you doing back? Is anything wrong?"

Her words gave him the opening he needed but he waited until she reached the landing. "I didn't want to come back but I had to," he said.

Facing him now, China appeared perplexed and worried.

"I know it's a lousy thing to ask," he said, "but I need money for medicine. First chance I get I'll pay it back."

"You won't pay me anything back."

"Then I won't take it. I'm not that kind of a guy."

"You will too," said China with a firmness that surprised him. "You have to take it. After all, you're sick." She had taken her key from her bag already. Now she led the way inside and told him to wait while she went to her room.

When she returned, she pressed a bill in his hand, then to his surprise, held up a lighter, and said, "This is for you, Chico—from me. I meant to give it to you before but I forgot all about it. I guess you know the reason why."

For a moment he felt embarrassed by the gift, guilty for the deception he was practicing on her. In another moment, though, his greed for the drug overcame his qualms and he accepted it.

"It's a swell one," he said, admiring the lighter, "but you shouldn't have done it."

Instead of answering, she looked up at him with concern and he knew what she was thinking. Again he felt a flicker of guilt and, unable to meet her eyes, he kissed her suddenly, then let her go. "I have to go now," he said. "I've got to get that medicine."

Halfway down the first flight from the landing, he heard the door open again and looked back. China was leaning over the railing. "Chico, take care of yourself," she said softly. "Get the medicine and go straight home."

"Don't worry," he answered, and went on down to the street. With the money tightly squeezed in one hand and the lighter in the other, he began to walk quickly. God, that was easy, he thought. Really easy. Why didn't I try that before?

Back with Angel again, he flashed the lighter in front of him and smiled.

"That's all you got?" Angel asked.

"No, this is just a present."

"Yeah, she must really go for you."

"All the way, friend. You know that."

"You going to keep it?"

"I told you it's a present."

"Then keep it for a while. It'll come in handy." Angel asked about the money then. "Got enough?" he said.

Chico nodded.

"Then let's get stoned."

They shot up in Angel's cellar. Chico took the needle first, feeling the kick immediately. "God, this is mean," he said. "I'm stoned already." He raised his hands and examined them.

"What would you do if you were king of this world?" he asked. It was as if he had spoken to himself. "I'd have a whole closet full of H," he continued, "and I'd dive into it and snort and pop and main till I dropped, then crawl out and swallow the key."

"Man, that ain't nothing," Angel replied. "If I was king, I'd get all the H in the world and pile it into a little room, then put a tube through the door and a spike and shoot it all up and get stoned to fly."

"Man, we're crazy."

"Yeah!"

"Suppose we really were?" said Chico. "I'd smoke pot, shoot H and C, and get a broad and eat her alive."

"Yeah," Angel said dubiously and rose to his feet. "Let's go to the movies."

They sat in the back seats and smoked. Soon Chico was nodding, the scenes blurring before his eyes. Suddenly he awoke with a start, aware that a gun had been fired.

"The cops here?" he asked.

"Man, you are stoned!" said Angel. "Weren't you watching the picture?"

"No."

"Shut up then, cause I am."

Chico sat up then and looked at the screen. He couldn't recognize anything. Suddenly he thought of his mother and wondered what she was doing. He felt sorry for her and wanted to cry, but he could only sniff. That irritated Angel, who suggested that they leave. "This picture stinks anyway," he said.

They walked to Times Square, both of them still somewhat high. Chico was taken by the crowds of people and the lights. Stopping, he looked about, then said, "Look at all these poor innocent souls who go to sleep and get up early for work while we're still having a crazy time. Yeah, man, all those poor suckers!"

He paused then to stare at the lights on the great signs above the Square, amazed at the sight of so many bulbs and the way they pulsed.

"Come on," said Angel impatiently, but Chico didn't move.

"Damn, all the lights in the world are right here!" he said. "This is real crazy!"

People were staring at him now, and Angel said, "For Christ's sakes, what hit you? Come on." He pulled him, but Chico refused to budge and kept staring. The bulbs were refusing to focus; there was only the incandescence, countless spots of light that kept pulsing till he felt they were tickling in his brain. There was something frightening about them. "I got to kick it off," he told himself. "Got to kick it off."

He heard Angel say, "Let's take the subway home." A moment later the question was repeated in a softer, kinder voice as if someone were speaking to him from afar. Then the voice changed, becoming Angel's again and, louder and louder, he heard him repeat: "Let's go home. Let's go home!" till Angel's voice was part of his brain. "Shot up!" he shouted. He was terrified.

"What's wrong?" Angel said in surprise.

"I'm scared. Did I take too much? Will I die?"

In answer, Angel drew him away from the crowd and into a doorway and slapped him. Chico started to cry. "Now what are you crying for?" Angel said.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

"For you, you're my best pal."

Angel laughed. "Let's get that train," he said. But once in the subway, the drug that was still working on him made him respond to the sound of the coin he dropped in the turnstile.

"Hear that?" Angel said. "It's really weird." He had already passed through the turnstile and now he came back out again to drop another coin in the slot. "Man, that's sweet," he said. Twice more he dropped a coin in the slot, and was about to add another when Chico stopped him.

"You're throwing money away!" he cried.

"Please, a last time!"

"Okay."

Angel dropped another dime in the slot, listening as he went

through the stile. "Weird," he remarked. "Real weird. Didn't you catch it?"

"Catch what?"

"Are you deaf?"

"No, let's catch that train!"

A train had moved into the platform, and the doors were about to close. Chico and Angel ran toward it, then stopped, frightened and unable to trust themselves. Their movements seemed weighted now, their reflexes all awry. They had time enough to board the train, were close enough to the door, but Chico cried out, "No! No, it might kill us!" and laughed as the door slid shut. "We fooled it that time."

When the train left, they sat down on a bench and waited, but something had happened to time; it oozed and they both felt the weight of it. Years were passing and no train came.

"Man, what kind of jive did you buy?" Chico asked. "This is crazy. Where's that train?"

"Yeah, where is it?"

In the distance now, they heard an approaching train, a low rumbling and a distinct tattoo of wheels beating over the ties in the roadbed.

"Man, do you hear that?" Angel said.

"What?"

"The wheels."

"Are you crazy?" Chico said, trying to prove that the drug had no such effect, but he heard the sound distinctly.

Both were quiet now, Angel listening intently and Chico trying to doze off, the rumbling having ceased for him. He heard only the illusion of wheels grinding out a monotonous iron tattoo—a sound which suddenly angered him, for some reason reminding him of his mother. In the next moment he heard her voice, distinctly. "Chico, you shouldn't do that," she said. "I know what's happening." The words came from far off, as if through a telephone, yet it wasn't really his mother's voice but his own imitating hers. "You shouldn't do that. The Law might catch up to you." He jumped to his feet.

"Angel, do you hear that?" he said.

Angel sprang up at the sound of Chico's voice. "Hear what?" Angel asked.

Chico didn't answer. He couldn't, for now a conglomeration of warring sounds seemed to burst around him and he began

to tremble. This phase ended with three distinct repercussions. First, it seemed as if two autos had crashed head on; then two trolleys. The third crash was deafening and he was certain that two racing trains had struck each other. Flashes of fire followed this, curling along the tracks, and he closed his eyes, then tried to look and saw nothing. In a moment of panic, he shielded his eyes. In another moment, the feeling of terror passed. But now he heard another sound—like drums in a jungle. Flashes of white fire followed this and, as they subsided, his mother's voice returned to accuse him. By now he had a partial hold on himself and he thought: It's my own conscience bothering me. He turned to Angel. "What station is this?"

"I don't know," said Angel, and just then the train thundered into the station.

Both stood up, edging toward the end of the platform to make sure they'd get aboard. Once in the train, the trip seemed endless. Time failed again, stagnated. They were moving in a void, through centuries, Chico believed, but at last they arrived at their station. They moved toward a stairway which seemed endless, going on up and up forever.

"Where's the last one? Jesus, what's wrong with me?" Chico asked himself, and at last found the step that brought him to the street.

Coming outside, he felt as if he were escaping from a cave and the fresh air burned his lungs. The street appeared to be moving and slowly but surely sinking. This was frightening enough, but he also thought that his legs weren't moving and couldn't feel them. "Am I really walking?" he asked himself, and looked down to see, almost falling. He looked at the street again and saw it sink, only to rise once more. When he blinked, to test the truth of this, the street fell away again, like a wave, and he felt he was about to go down himself. He moved to the side of a building then, to hold himself, and looked down at the sidewalk. So near and so far away it seemed. It rose and fell like the ocean, and he called to Angel for help.

"What's the matter, are you sick?"

"Yeah, I'm sick," he said.

Angel took him by the arm as they walked away. "Man, you can't go up to the house like this. You're goofed out,"

Angel said, and led him to the room in his own cellar. Chico flopped in a chair and closed his eyes.

chapter 20

A FAINT WIND at first, no more, and nothing changed, nothing was about to happen; but the sky suddenly took on shadow and the faint wind instead of subsiding began to rise and assert itself with a steadily increasing pressure, began to voice itself, sighing first, making an almost pleasant sound—but this soon changed to a whine and countless unidentifiable sounds began to break. The lifeless palms were swaying, their green arms beginning to toss. Chico stood still, the pail of water hanging from one hand. With his other hand he made the sign of the cross, then started to run as the wind rose and enveloped him like a living thing. He ran and suddenly his feet left the ground. For a moment he felt helpless, treading nothing, then he sprawled, his chin striking the ground and the pail flying away. It began to roll, he heard it banging and clattering away, and everything was black, but he knew he could not lie there. He had to get back to the house. He opened his eyes and got up and began to run, feeling helpless against the force of the wind. Palm fronds sailed wildly over his head, then he saw the tree and flung himself down beneath it, only to rise once more as it bent before the windy deluge, suddenly emitting a sound like a rifle crack. As it began to topple he heard a woman scream, but already he was running. Looking back, he saw no one—nothing but a heaving, distorted landscape, unrecognizable terrain gripped by an all-embracing evil force that was shaping anew the face of the earth. And the sky was black—roiling black—the air full of flying objects, some ridiculous, some awesome, all unnavigable, riding to the whim of a wind that roared now like the voice of Hell itself. But it was the black sky that was so terrifying and which he felt he couldn't escape; this was the real image of evil. He couldn't escape; he closed his eyes and prayed and didn't remember moving. What took

place immediately afterward remained lost. Somewhere contact was lost, there was a lapse and a leap beyond consciousness, an interval in which time, yielding perhaps to the distortions of fear, became immobilized, did not exist, the pendulum only resuming flight when he heard his grandmother cry out: "Close the shutters!" How he reached the house he didn't know, but he was there and in the dark he heard his grandmother praying, and the wind trying to silence her voice. "But God will save us," he told himself. He repeated that now aloud, he thought, and awoke suddenly in a dark room through which a cool wind moved, making the web of the dream seem real yet, as true as the actual hurricane which had spawned it.

But that had happened long ago in Puerto Rico, and he was here now. What was real was the darkness of the room, the voice of the wind and the remnants of dissolving fear. For a prolonged moment he lay inert, listening to the wind, reluctant to accept this wakeful state—why, he didn't know nor did he seek an answer. All he knew was that he wished to sleep and embrace the dream again, to return once more to that other life. Even the terror of the hurricane didn't matter, for he remembered—and this was the part the dream had denied him—how he had gone to sleep safe in the house with the oil lamp lit again and the wind outside lulling away. It was this he sought to grasp now, that vanished moment when all fears departed and someone near stood by to guard him.

He closed his eyes but couldn't sleep. There was no way back, only the harsh, living moment and the darkness of the room. Opening his eyes again, he got up from bed to stand at the window. He saw it was day yet, the light dimmed by an overhanging sky and the air carrying the explicit threat of the approaching storm. For some reason he did not want to remain in the house. He couldn't explain this to himself and tried to deny the fear he felt by hurriedly dressing. He had no thought of going any place; he only wanted to escape the house whose emptiness seemed inordinately threatening. It was enmeshing him, but he told himself he was only hurrying to escape the rain which soon would fall, told himself this though he had no place in mind to go.

Once outside the house, he headed straight toward his grandmother's. The visit seemed unpremeditated to him, not

the ordained, inevitable carry-over of the dream which had left something wanting. Yet as soon as he reached the house he realized that he wanted to come all the while.

Rain fell as his feet touched the stoop. It slid from the sky in grey wavering sheets and the wind went slack. The street stood deserted and the houses across the way appeared to blur and merge. They were all grey, unlivid in and unreal, abstractions of all the houses he'd ever known since he'd come here. With this vision in mind, he ran up the stairs.

The old woman answered his knock and he walked past her as if she wasn't there, finding a chair in the kitchen. When she turned and came toward him, he had the feeling that he'd been sitting there a long time. She was talking now but he didn't listen, didn't care to. He allowed her to go on and on while he listened to the rain beating on the windowsill, answering a question mechanically, without realizing what she had said or how he'd replied. When she began to prepare something to eat, he followed her movements for several minutes before he finally realized what she was doing. But he didn't want to eat, he hadn't come to be fed--he didn't know why he had come, still he didn't stop her preparations, and he continued to watch her set the table.

He ate then and immediately afterward forgot what he had had. Now he was sitting in the chair near the window again. It seemed only moments later when he turned from the window, but he saw the table had been cleared and cleaned. The old woman was speaking. She had been speaking for some time but he had not heard her. Now he did, listening without interest at first, then alerted, for the old woman had mentioned the Devil.

"Yes, your uncle was drunk," he heard her say, "and he saw the Devil in person. With his gun he fired at him but the gun turned to flame and he ran back into the house for the crucifix. And with that he chased the Devil down the road. It was a thing part horse, part dragon, with a lion's paws and forked tail. Your uncle chased it away because he was drunk. Your mother and aunt were paralyzed because it tried to jump over the fence . . ."

There was more but Chico didn't listen, closing his mind against the picture she'd evoked. Yet for a moment, he saw an association between the Evil One she'd described and him-

self; heretofore this was only a chilling tale, and long ago he had lost belief in it, but now it seemed to have meaning and a kind of validity which he couldn't describe. He didn't wish to, either, fearing to establish identification, but in the back of his mind a tiny replica of the Evil One remained. It laughed at him and, oddly, as it watched him, he recognized its eyes—and they were his own. This was the moment of pure terror for him. It passed quickly and he found that his grandmother had stopped speaking and was staring at him. Did she know then, he wondered. And was that why she had told the story? Was that why she was staring at him, because she recognized what resided within him? Her dark luminous eyes seemed to be seeing through him now. She appeared to be waiting for some admission, expecting it, he thought. The idea was so strong that it suddenly aggravated his fear again, and once more he experienced the terrifying sound of the organ notes which he'd heard before. Starting softly, the weird music rose quickly to a piercing screech that threatened to splinter his skull. Pain accompanied it, pain so intense that he jumped up without a word and fled from the house.

Blocks away, he found himself walking and soaked to the skin. The rain was slackening though the sky was still dark, the street empty. Someone was saying, "It's a bad neighborhood. That guy who said Puerto Rican mothers are dirty, we dragged him around the corner and belted him. Some are poor, some are rich, some don't give a shit for shit, that's the truth. If it wasn't for Cuba, we'd be a free world. Some Cubans have the luck, the luck of the Irish, like my uncle. He has a nice car, a side line, and he makes his money. I mean money is money anyway you put it. We don't do so hot but still we get our rice and beans. But look at the neighborhood. I like it and I hate it. Before, it was nice, hardly any cops came around, and now, oh, man, it's like having something you don't want. The streets are dirty, everything changed it. The kids grew up, they got bad. There's too much reefers, too much dope—plenty of things made them change. They sold us knives and guns. Yeah, in the olden days you didn't hear of kids going around killing each other."

Chico stopped. He didn't recognize the voice but it was his own, he realized, and a kind of rambling, inadequate protest

to a world he had not made and did not want, a brief account of the facts which no one cared to know.

chapter 21

HE WENT up a flight of stairs, sweating now, the familiar pain in his stomach impelling him forward, up one flight, then another and another. The fourth set of steps almost checked him and he wanted to lie down. He couldn't make it, he told himself, but he knew he had to or he'd die. Moving on, he paused halfway between the landings, aware of a strange sound. He'd heard it below, but now it troubled him; it was louder, a distinct but sporadic patter—like the sound of code at a distance, or someone tapping on glass. For a moment he imagined a woman with long fingernails doing this to attract his attention, but the sound came from somewhere above and no one knew he was coming. Besides, it was almost dark in the hall, the light laden with dusk. He felt its embrace now as a tangible element which inspired fear.

Suddenly he realized that the tapping had ceased altogether, leaving the house in depthless quiet. This, too, was disturbing, the air of discreteness lending an almost human quality to the house. The shadow within the hall grew fainter, then a yellow light filtered down from the skylight above. Chico realized the meaning of the tapping he had heard. It was the rain pattering out. The summer storm had fled, and he felt the light touching him, alive and warm like life returning. He watched with fascination the streak of gold reflected from the worn bannister; then, remembering why he had come, he went on up the stairs to the landing. Before an unnumbered door he stood now and knocked till a voice replied, "Who is it?"

"Angel's boy," said Chico, feeling two ice-cold rivulets of sweat working down from his armpits. He waited while a chain-bolt rattled and the door opened with indecisive slowness.

"Ray?"

"That's me."

"I'm Chico."

The eyes that surveyed him were veiled, but not enough to hide the fear behind them; they were like a hunted animal's, glazed, as if focused on some imperceptible and distant object, the heavy-lidded eyes of an addict. Chico recognized this instantly and felt heartened, knowing Ray would understand.

"I want some stuff," he said quietly. He produced the lighter China had given him. "Maybe you'll take this, I'm desperate," he said. "I'm sick."

Ray gave a quick look and took the lighter, examined it with apparent casualness, then slipped it in his pocket and returned with the drug.

Hours later, when Chico came down from his high, he realized what he'd done--given away the gift he'd said he would always keep. Now that it had happened, he felt ashamed; but, worse, he was afraid China would guess what had become of it. Still, he had to see her and, much as he feared discovery, he felt impelled to go to her as if to test his position. It was the wrong thing to do, he realized, but in spite of that, he went off to China's house.

It was late now, the last signs of the rain had vanished, the streets were crowded, noisy, shadowed, the day already resolved. The summer dusk like a thin, transparent cloud arose in the east beyond the river. A time for rest, a time to eat, and an unreasonable hour to visit, but Chico no longer thought in terms of time, nor abided by the common rules that others lived by. China would be eating, but he had to see her, had to. A kind of anxiety dominated him now, yet he felt he knew what would happen.

Reaching her stoop, he hesitated. But he had come too far and there was no retreat now. Better to get it over with, he thought, and went up. China, opening the door to his knock, looked surprised when she saw him. "Who is it?" her father asked, and her mother stood up to see. China didn't answer, couldn't speak, but her mother invited Chico in.

Ten minutes later, while he was waiting in the living room, China came in, her dark eyes alert, probing him quickly before she sat down beside him on the couch.

"Anything wrong?" she asked at last.

"No," said Chico. "Why?"

"Well, you never called at such a time before."

"I explained that, didn't I? It was a mistake. I'd have waited downstairs if your mother had let me." But this, he knew, explained nothing. She was expecting more, but she had no idea what was behind his visit. Even he himself wondered for a moment, for his mind was unsettled. Before, an issue had seemed at stake, now it was all quite vague. He was aware that the fate of the cigarette lighter occasioned this visit and lit a cigarette with a match, waving it out with deliberate slowness. Finally China said, "What happened to the lighter I gave you?"

With the question asked, he felt much calmer than he'd expected. "Haven't got it on me," he answered easily and waited.

"You didn't lose it?"

"No, I've got it."

"Where?"

"Home, of course I forgot it." He still felt at ease, in no way resenting her questions. It was almost like a game now, in which he was testing her responses. So far, so good; deceiving her so easily was more than he'd expected.

But he was wrong about that, for she countered him by saying, "Next time you come, I want to see the lighter."

"Why, do you think I lost it?"

"Just bring it," she said, "or don't bother to come."

It irritated him to hear her speak like this. At another time he would have told her off, now he simply said, "Don't worry about it, it's home all right. You'll get that money I borrowed from you too."

"Oh, I don't want the money. You're feeling better?"

"Not so much, but I'm not dying, and you're not giving me the money. That's out, because I don't take money from a girl." This was another test to see how she would respond.

"But I didn't lend it to you, so you don't have to pay it back."

"I know, but I'm going to see?" He said it with all seriousness but inwardly he smiled to himself, knowing now she was willing to give him money—the real proof of her affection.

If only she were like Carmen, if she'd understand how much he needed to have the drug, everything would be perfect and he wouldn't have to con her. Not that it really bothered him now, for he'd committed himself and there was all the more satisfaction in deceiving her because he knew she was checking on him. Probably she had girl friends in the neigh-

borhood keeping an eye on him, but he was too smart for all of them. They were stupid, they didn't realize what a little H could do for a guy, how it made one feel. That was the trouble with China, too; she'd never understand, he'd never talk her into believing. That was what made her different and had made him want to keep away from the stuff and beat the habit. But now everything had somehow changed—as if he'd already slipped over the precipice, or stepped beyond the invisible line that divided all addicts from other people. He no longer felt like staying. If he did stay, he knew he'd get sick and he couldn't allow that to happen. Pretending that he had to go home, he stood up.

China remained seated, looking up at him. She didn't believe him, he knew, and for a moment he wondered how much she really knew, what she was thinking.

"Well, I'll see you," he said, and looked toward the door.

"When?"

"Maybe tomorrow night."

She didn't believe that, either. He expected her to rise and go to the hall with him but she didn't move. This was unexpected, like a slap in the face, but, in a way, he was glad. It made his leave-taking easier, or so he thought as he said good night.

Yet, once in the street, he began to think of what he had done. Giving the lighter away for dope was the worst thing ever, really low, and he was ashamed of himself. But what if he got it back? The idea amazed him. Why hadn't he thought of it before? He had only to retrieve it and all would be the same as before. The idea was so convenient he didn't realize that repossessing the lighter would solve nothing. His immediate problem, he believed, was to get it back without money, and that set him thinking. How? How? How? And then, as if it had been in his mind all the while, it came to him. He'd go to his grandmother's house, hit up his sister and buy back the lighter. A marvelous idea, something for the books, he thought—if it succeeded. And that was the trouble, it might not. Certainly, his sister wouldn't give him the money, nor lend it. He had to have an angle. By the time he reached the house he'd solved it, he was certain of that and ran up the stairs.

His sister was home, but so was her husband, which made it difficult. Because he felt desperate he told his sister that

he had to speak to her alone and made it appear urgent. In another room then, he said, "Mom sent me over because she didn't get paid. She needs five dollars."

"For what?"

The question was shot at him but he was expecting it and said, "She has to go to the doctor."

"She's sick again?"

"Yes, not bad, but she's got to see the doctor and she didn't get paid." He watched his sister, noting the doubt and suspicion in her eyes. She wanted to refuse, but he knew she wouldn't, not this time anyhow; she had to give him the money, and finally she did.

He almost ran toward Ray's house, anxious to retrieve the lighter and even more anxious to obtain the drug his body demanded. Ray was there and let him in.

"I want that lighter," Chico said immediately.

Ray only smiled. Perhaps he'd been expecting something like this, but he said nothing and gave back the lighter. It was an old story to him. Others had left similar tokens which they later claimed, only to bring them back again to leave them in his possession for good.

Next day Chico went to see China and showed her the lighter, telling her a friend had borrowed it and that he wouldn't let anyone have it again.

"That's not what you told me last night," China said, and he flushed. Why he had changed the story he didn't know, but he recovered quickly, saying, "I know that's not what I told you last night."

"Then why did you say it?"

"Because you'd have been real mad and, anyway, you wouldn't have believed me if I told you a friend had it."

"But you did let someone have it?"

"That's right."

"Well, you better not let him have it again."

Her remark angered him, but he didn't say anything. He was getting sick and needed a jolt. After making his excuses, he left and picked up Angel at the poolroom.

The next day he was in the same predicament as usual—without money and in need of the drug. There seemed no way to get it, either. That was the terrible thing about it, the day-to-day demand and the necessity to fulfill that demand,

the constant anxiety which this aroused in him, the extremes to which it forced him.

No matter what happened, he told himself, he wouldn't let go of the cigarette lighter, not even if he had to die. But even as he said that, he saw in his mind the flights of stairs that led upward to Ray's apartment, saw himself mounting them to knock at his door. All morning he lay in bed with the vision constantly returning to him, till at last he stood up and dressed. Leaving the house, he went for a walk, hoping to find Angel, but he wasn't at the usual haunts. There was no one around whom he knew well enough to borrow a cent from, and Carmen wasn't at home. He drifted to her house and, receiving no answer, went straight to Ray's.

It was done then. He left the lighter with Ray and that night he went back to Ray's again, for he couldn't go to see China without the lighter, nor could he get it back without money. He told Ray to keep it and asked for some more H.

chapter 22

A WEEK LATER he took China to a party. He had not seen her since he pawned the lighter, and she was angry with him, but at last she had agreed to go. Now she didn't like the crowd. She was acting oddly, too, and hardly spoke. A short while later she went to the kitchen and, when she came back, Chico asked her to dance.

"Again?" she said.

"Sure, why not?"

"Well, I'm tired."

"You don't want to dance with me?"

"No, I have to leave. It's getting late, and you know my mother."

They'd arrived late, but he knew her mother. He walked her home. She tried to leave him in the hallway, but he stopped her.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing."

He had her against the wall now, one arm on each side of

her to keep her there. "All right, if nothing's wrong, at least give me something for walking you home."

"Meaning what?"

"Well, you were going up without letting me kiss you," he said, moving his face toward hers.

"Not tonight."

"Why?"

In answer she moved her face away from his. He grabbed her and she broke away and started up the stairs. About to go after her, he stopped himself. "See you tomorrow," he called, but she didn't reply.

That did it. He decided to go back to the party then. Bop records were playing when he arrived and the music sounded fine. He lit up a stick of pot and watched the others. He felt enlivened and asked a girl to dance. While he was dancing, he noticed another girl. She looked high. Several minutes later he walked over to her and introduced himself. On a sofa he found her easy, she went for his line and said she liked him. She didn't mind his hands, didn't mind anything. He walked her into the bedroom.

He saw China the next afternoon. She was coming down the street toward him. She saw him, and walked past as if he didn't exist. He didn't understand, but he wasn't going to run after her. She'll be around looking for me, he told himself, and walked away.

But she didn't come around and he didn't see anything of her for three days. That troubled him, though he wouldn't admit it to himself. He kept telling himself she would be around and that he would never go crawling on his knees to see her. Only punks did that. But by mid-afternoon he changed his mind and called at her house.

She told him he couldn't come in, because no one else was home.

"Oh, all of a sudden it's like that?" he said.

"Well . . ." she hesitated and couldn't look at him.

"How come you didn't speak to me in the street?" he went on. "Or don't you remember giving me the high hat?"

"I don't remember seeing you," she answered, lying awkwardly.

"You saw me all right, even with your nose in the air.

So don't give me that. What happened? Don't I rate any more?"

"It's not that." She looked straight into his eyes. "It's something else—going around."

"What is it?"

"I can't tell you because I'm not supposed to."

He knew what she meant then. "I was only talking to that girl at the party, that's all."

"Well, I heard more than that."

"So I kissed her. It didn't mean anything to either of us."

"No, not much."

"Well, I was sore because of the way you left me and ran up the stairs. It was like getting even with you."

She didn't say anything to that, but he saw she was turning it over in her mind. "Maybe it was my fault," she finally decided.

"Then can I come in now?"

"For a while," she said, and they went into the living room. He expected her to mention the lighter but she didn't, perhaps knowing what had happened to it. Finally her disturbing silence moved him and he put his arm around her, thinking that was what she was waiting for, and she responded. He felt her excitement and that roused him so that he thought he wanted her and, indirectly, asked her. She pretended she didn't know what he was talking about.

"You know what I mean," he said. She looked at him oddly, as if she still wanted him, but shook her head and replied, "It's not going to happen today."

"No?"

"No."

They kept parrying for a while and then somehow he didn't want her, and this feeling grew inside him. At the same time her continued refusals angered him and he insisted, at last resorting to force. She protested once, struggled against him and then gave in with an unexpected suddenness that left him almost unprepared. But afterward she seemed angry, and wouldn't look at him. He had not wanted her in the first place and now he felt let down. The whole act left him with the curious feeling that he had not been a participant; he'd done nothing, felt nothing, and all he wished to do now was leave. He stood up and walked across the floor. China was still on the couch. She didn't move, didn't look up. He turned

around and said, "Well, I'm going. I need a half a dollar. Could you lend me that?"

He expected her to refuse, or at least get up; instead she told him to take the money from her purse on the kitchen table. In the kitchen he picked up the purse and, when he saw all the silver he knew he couldn't stop himself and took a dollar in change, then called: "Thanks! I won't forget to pay you back."

Taking the money was easy, but once he reached the street he was assailed by guilt and fear, thinking, How could I do that to her? I'm real gone now. Worse, though, was his fear. Had she allowed him to go to her purse to test him? To see if he would swing her? The thought almost drove him back to the house; he wanted to admit to her what he'd done, ask her to forgive him, but in another moment that other person within him, who had made him commit the act, equated everything easily. "Yeah, she don't know how much she had, there was a lot of change in her purse. Anyway, I'll make it up to her. I'll take her to a million places as soon as I get the chance." He jingled the coins in his pocket and walked on thinking of all the places China and he would go to together, the fun they'd have, the money he'd throw away. And believed himself. But these were promises his other "self" would never allow him to keep.

chapter 23

AFTER THAT he was careful not to go near China's house when he was high. Then one night he forgot himself. He'd been with Angel all day and, when he arrived at China's house, he was still a little high. Perhaps she noticed but she didn't say anything, and they walked to the park. It was a hot night and he removed his jacket. She noticed the blood on the arm of his shirt and asked about it.

"I cut myself," he said quickly, but there was no cut, and she stared at him.

"You haven't stopped, have you?" she said.

She had him, he couldn't say anything. It was a crazy thing to have seen her in this condition.

"You know what I told you," she said when he didn't answer.

"What?" he asked mechanically.

"I'm going to quit you."

"Why?"

"You know why."

"I don't know."

"You're using a needle, and I've been stupid enough to give you money."

Because he was still a little high, he believed he could pass this off casually.

"What's a little snort now and then?" he said.

It didn't work, and she alarmed him by replying, "I don't care, I'm going to take it too!" Not that she really would; he didn't believe that at all, but he said, "Do it and I'll break your neck."

"Sure, because the stuff's in you, you're saying that. But you don't care, all you can do is lie when you're like this. I don't believe anything you say any more."

"Keep it up," he said, angry now. "Just say what you said before and I'll belt you in the mouth."

It was the way he said it that frightened her; she knew he meant it, and because her threat had brought this about, she felt she had to undo it. "I didn't mean what I said," she told him. "I just didn't know what to say to try to make you stop."

"But I am stopping. It's just that it's hard. I told you that before, I can't quit right off. Nobody can. But I promised you and I'm keeping that promise."

Even as he said that, as he lied so glibly, he believed himself. And she believed him, too. He saw that in her eyes. His tension left and he felt an infinite sensation of well-being, a desire to talk, felt he could go on and on for hours so long as she believed him. They were walking back to her house now and he was talking, saying anything that came into his head, impossible things that could never happen. China was listening, believing it all, he thought. "In a few years we can get married," he said. She looked at him. "In a few years, if you keep using dope, you're not going to be alive." He had no answer for that.

They went into the hallway. He was still feeling good; what

she'd said didn't alter anything. They went upstairs; by then his high was wearing off. China's mother and aunt were in the living room. That was unexpected, but there was nothing they could do about it. Anyway, they don't know, he thought; they can't see anything wrong. But he couldn't keep his eyes open. He sat on the couch and tried to listen and to enter the conversation, but their voices lulled him and his eyes kept closing. China noticed this and elbowed him. Her aunt said, "Is anything wrong?"

"Got a headache," Chico answered, passing his hands over his eyes. He knew now that he couldn't stay, yet he didn't want to leave China. He saw her watching him. "I need air," he said. "It's too hot in here."

Both of them got up then. In the hall China started to cry. He knew why and, feeling badly about it, pulled her toward him, her face against his chest.

"Now do you see?" she said.

"See what?" He pretended he didn't know what she meant.

"They'll find out next, my mother will."

"They don't know anything. I'm not high now, anyway."

"They knew something was wrong, I could tell. If you'd only stop. If my mother ever finds out, I hope God kills me!"

As they stood against the landing rail in the dim light of the hall, he heard her appeal, the hurt in her voice touched him so that he was hurt in turn. Yet he had a feeling of being removed from what was happening to both of them, of being an onlooker watching this scene and it wasn't real. It seemed that two hallucinatory people stood in a faded light, close together, two more sat in the living room, talking endlessly though he could not hear them—but discussing him perhaps. There was more—the whole house came into vision as he glanced down the dark stairwell, floors, and rooms, and their occupants—but no sound. Nothing came from below where the empty steps floated away into shadow. Nothing down there, nothing outside. The world existed only as a trembling mirage and he was no longer part of it, as it was no longer part of him. He wasn't one of the two figures on the landing, either, that was only a segment of the whole illusion, a bizarre reflection of memory which somehow his mind retained.

What brought him back was the sheen of China's dark head against his chest. He stared at her hair, absorbed by the way it shone in the dim light, the vitality it possessed. He

touched it then, tentatively, ran his hand over it and felt its smoothness glide under his skin—then he forgot everything, the house, the world outside, even China; everything blurred and became part of the repeated stroking movement of his hand. He could have gone on like that for hours, forever, he thought, lost in this momentary illusion of eternity.

Finally China looked up at him and he saw her face vaguely. There were tears in her eyes, yet she was smiling now, relieved. "I'm quitting it, I really am," he was saying, and felt unburdened of a great weight. He kissed her good night and started down the stairs—and everything came back at once. If he did not have to face the street, if he stayed here, he could escape. Down below, outside, something was waiting for him and he could not face it. Once he stepped beyond the door it would grasp him, and he had no strength to resist, nor any real desire to resist it, either. Even now he was hurrying to meet it.

chapter 24

TEN O'CLOCK, morning—but the grey light in the room denied the hour. The room itself appeared strange, and his back hurt. He rubbed his eyes, stared at the magazine cut-out of a girl on the wall. Familiar, yes, but . . . his eyes dropped, he was not in bed but folded into a chair, and across the room now he saw someone in bed—not his bed—an unmoving figure. A dead man? he thought, and suddenly remembered he was in Angel's room. Thank God for that! His ridiculous fear, roused by the sight of Angel's body, vanished and he stood up, fully dressed.

Angel didn't move. He lay grotesquely across the bed as if he had fallen that way and lain through the night without stirring. His breath came lightly, but even in sleep there was a suggestion of death, an approximation which distilled fear. The whole house in its silence lent weight to the feeling. He called Angel's name to wake him and assure himself, but Angel didn't respond, the sound of his breath seemed to subside. Chico bent over him and shook him, gently at first, then roughly. Angel protested in an unrecognizable idiom. Touch-

ing him, though, gave Chico back his assurance. At the same time he felt the need of the drug, an empty sensation in his stomach that soon would have to be satisfied. Angel's inert body had aggravated it, set in motion a sudden demand, which made him wonder.

The night before Angel had shared with him—it was all he had, he'd said, but Chico knew him and knew his habit: he'd save some for the next day, for this morning. Once more Chico shook him to make certain he was sound asleep, then searched the room quickly. He found nothing. With trembling hands he had gone through Angel's jacket hanging on the doorknob. Now he looked at it again and slipped his hand into the deep breast pocket where a handkerchief was stuffed. He hadn't looked at the handkerchief before, didn't want to touch it, but now he unfolded it and found the hidden caps—four of them. "I'll just take two," he told himself, thinking of leaving the other two for Angel, but as he went to the bathroom he had all four caps and the handkerchief. He flushed the handkerchief down the toilet, telling himself, "He'll think he lost it, if he ever remembers he had it."

He shot up quickly, and went back to Angel's room, finding him still asleep, still in the same position, which appeared more grotesque now. The light in the room seemed dimmer.

Chico felt its walls closing in as if to trap him and heard the first soft notes of the organ music, that awful music in his head, soft but beginning to swell already. He moved toward the door and was suddenly sure it was locked, the key gone. He would have battered it down to get out, but the key was there and he let himself out and fled down the stairs.

As he came out into the street, the organ music subsided, and there was the block bathed in the brilliant, clean light of morning. He was totally unprepared for this, forgetting that the shades had been drawn upstairs in the room. The shabby houses stood exposed to the merciless eye of the sun, a brutal mass of brick, ugly and wasted, and bearing those still uglier fire escapes, contraptions of rusty iron that clung like twisted skeletons to every house. These held his eyes, fascinating him. They appeared to be moving; they wavered, came to life. He shook his head and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he found himself staring directly at a windowpane that had caught the sun and was flashing fire—real fire, he thought for the moment, and couldn't move. Then the pane was again

transformed, shrinking to the size of a shoe-box, its reflected fire intensified till he had to blink. When he opened his eyes again, he was astonished to find the window's dimensions normal once more.

"I must be high," he told himself, "real stoned."

He spent the rest of the morning in a darkened movie theater, nodding in a state between sleep and wakefulness, jerking up when any sound disturbed him, and nodding away again. What transpired on the screen was beyond him—blurred figures that floated away on the muted notes of music, a story without beginning or end, meaning or design. Later, he thought he heard someone call him but paid no attention, for it was not like a real voice. This happened several times and then, distinctly, he heard someone behind him say, "China is back here."

He came erect then, turned, and in the darkness of the movie house studied the faces behind him. They were barely discernible at first, then he made them out, the rapt faces of strangers who were not even aware of him, so intent were they on the unreeling images that flashed upon the screen. But someone had spoken to him, he was sure of that. He could still hear the voice inside his head, both familiar and strange, like an echo. His belief in it was so strong that he stood up to find the one who had spoken. Three rows back, to his surprise, he found China. She was not aware of him till he dropped heavily into the seat next to her. She turned then and stared as if she didn't know him.

"What's wrong?" he said when she didn't speak.

"Oh, you know all right. Do I have to explain?"

He felt no restraint now, the promises of last evening forgotten. Almost defiantly, he said, "Yeah, so I'm high, but how did you know?"

"How do I know?" He thought she was going to laugh, but she went on, "I know the signs now, even in the dark. I've had experience—because of you."

The way she spoke puzzled him; it wasn't like her at all, and he still had the impression that at any moment she would laugh. As he watched her face, he saw this wasn't true. She was completely serious. Realizing this, he no longer wanted to stay, and asked her to leave with him. At first she refused, and then abruptly gave in.

They left the movie house together and walked to the park,

not speaking till they stood under the cool shadow of a bridge. There, isolated from other strollers and the heat of the sun, she began crying, at the same time repeating his name over and over again.

"What is it?" he said.

"Chico, don't you remember what you said last night? Have you forgotten so soon? Look at you now."

"Yeah, look at me," he replied. "I'm high and I can get high any time I want. I don't have to ask nobody's permission."

"But, Chico, I want you to stop. Take a good look at yourself in the mirror and see what it's doing to you. It makes you uglier every day."

Those words hit him and he dropped his head, unable to face her now. "You've asked me for money. You've lied to me. You've done everything. Maybe it's too late."

"Let's walk," he said, not wanting to hear any more. "Let's get out of here."

"I don't care to walk."

"Then let's go to my house?" He didn't expect her to agree, but she did.

In his own room, with the shades drawn, they faced each other in the dusky light, China waiting. She didn't resist now, and didn't want to; there was a kind of abandon in the way she acted, as if for the first time she was really giving all of herself without reservation, but his efforts came to nothing and finally they lay side by side upon the bed. For a long while neither of them spoke, then China asked the question he knew was coming and he explained, telling her about the effects of the drug.

"I didn't know that happened," she said.

"I knew," he answered, "but I didn't believe it would happen to me." He paused here, then added, "I'm going to a hospital and get cured."

"You are?"

"Yes, I'm going to turn myself in. It's the only thing."

"I hope you mean that."

"I do," he said.

"It's the best thing. Look what's happened to you already. You're not the same, you've changed completely."

He lay there, thinking of what she'd said, and was frightened, for he knew he had changed, he was no longer the same person. If he went to the hospital they could cure him

there. They'd have something, a medicine, or whatever they used.

While he was still lying there, thinking, China had risen and left the room. Coming back again, she stood at the doorway and he raised his head.

"I'm leaving," she said.

"What for?"

"Because I have to."

He didn't want to get up but she was expecting him to walk her home. At the outer door, just before they left the house, she said to him, "When are you going to the hospital?"

He closed the door, locked it and, putting the key in his pocket, "I don't know," he said, "maybe tomorrow. I have to think about it."

"But what's there to think about?"

"I don't know, I just have to think about it, that's all. Come on, let's go."

chapter 25

BEFORE LEAVING CHINA at her stoop, Chico promised to see her at two the next day, but he overslept and in the afternoon Angel came to the house. That way, he put the hospital out of his mind. He didn't want to go now. It had been one thing to speak of taking the cure, another to make the actual move. Besides, his mother would know then and that alone was enough to hold him back. And he was afraid, too, dreading the thought of having the drug taken away completely and going through the agony of kicking the habit without a grain to relieve him. He shook when he thought of that and did not mention the hospital to Angel.

Later on, they went to the poolroom, then walked to Angel's house and found Tito waiting for them on the stoop. He'd been there for some time, and Chico knew what that meant—he had a job to pull. They went upstairs first and sat in Angel's room. Tito mentioned the job, but Chico wasn't interested.

"But, man, this is an easy one," Tito said, but Chico shook

his head; something told him not to go. Besides, he wanted to break his habit, and he still had a vague idea of going to the hospital. But Tito and Angel expected him to go with them. Tito said, "What's the matter, are you punking out?"

"I never said I was in on this one," Chico answered.

"Yeah, what's wrong?" Angel said. "You're letting us down."

"I'm out of it, that's all," Chico told him. He didn't bother to explain. Angel and Tito glanced at each other and, hesitating only a moment, decided to go without him.

He was alone with his own thoughts now and he didn't want to be. He thought of China waiting for him, and expecting him to go to the hospital. Always letting her down, making her wait, breaking his promises. His word meant nothing any more, not even to himself. Such reflections were too hard to face and he wished he had gone with Angel and Tito. For a moment he thought of running after them, then changed his mind, and waited, expecting them back soon. When they didn't come, a kind of tension began to gather in him and he was sure they'd been caught. In that case, it was foolish to wait, for the police might come to search the room. Still he didn't move, waiting for them with growing apprehension, ready to run for the roof if someone knocked on the door.

But no one came, the house was abnormally quiet, as if waiting, listening as he was for footsteps on the long flights of stairs. And that was disturbing, to feel that this inanimate, decaying structure possessed an awareness as keen as his own, that it saw and heard whatever went on, patiently bearing witness to a thousand secrets and hoarding them for itself alone. If it could talk, he thought, and far away in the shadowy depths of the hall he heard a door close—a remote sound; then nothing but silence swirling and thickening. He stiffened and at the same time felt the house brace itself, catch its breath as it watched from a hundred hidden eyes, aware and knowing who the caller was while he sat like a blind man in Angel's room and waited. Waiting for the footsteps that didn't come up the stairs. That was the hardest thing, enduring those long moments of utter silence. Then, just as he was about to relax, thinking the sound had been imaginary, steps sounded from below, quick, hard, as if someone had rushed the stairs. He sprang to his feet, ready to run for the roof but, as suddenly as they began, the footsteps ended, on the

first landing and a door opened, then closed with a bang which set trembling the door before him.

Silence again. He sank down upon the bed, his heart beating, head aching. Now that it was over, he didn't care, he wouldn't run any more, no matter who came, no matter what happened. No longer did the silence torment, it was soothing now, a desirable anodyne that quieted his racing blood, coming over him in waves till the light faded and the walls fell away like banks of snow in a burning sun.

He slept then.

Later, voices in the room disturbed him but in the isolation between sleep and wakefulness, only his senses alerted, his mind's eyes failed to focus and could not bring reality into being. This was a moment of terror, to hear murmurs, voices while he could not move nor determine what was happening. A wild burst of laughter broke the last veil of sleep and he saw Angel and Tito looking down at him and smiling.

"Yeah, look at him," Angel said. "Sleeping like a baby."

"What happened?" Chico said. "What took you so long?"

The smiles faded from their faces. "We waited and waited," said Angel, "but there was no business."

"Then what were you laughing about?"

"Nothing, except we got some stuff anyhow. Tito flung his coat in the pawnshop cause his tongue was hanging to his laces."

"Yeah, that's a gone coat, but frig it, where's the water? I'm dying to get off."

Angel left the room and came back with a pop bottle filled with water. Excited now and sweating, he said, "This is a bad hour. My mother might be coming home. She'll be in here, thinking I'm sleeping yet, so let's go up on the roof landing."

Chico followed them up the stairs to the roof landing and watched Angel ready the works. "I'm going first," Angel declared, "for being taken on a wild goose chase. And you're last, Chico."

"You mean I'm nothing."

"What's that?"

"I'm off it."

"Again?" Angel didn't believe him. He was ready now, the syringe loaded, his arm tied. He hit himself and, as he began to kick, he said, "Look at him, he wants to stay off it. Look at this good blood come up."

"That don't mean a thing, I'm not taking it," Chico replied.

"Just look at me boot it and you will."

"Nay, I'm finished."

Angel didn't answer, he was shooting it in now, emptying the syringe, but Tito, who had intended to go next, insisted that Chico take his shot. He didn't want him out of the circle, but Chico kept refusing and then suddenly gave in and took the syringe.

When he finished, Angel was sitting down, blind already and started to nod. Chico stared at him and then noticed how dark the hall was; the stairway seemed to be trembling now. An airplane thundered overhead, and somewhere below in the house people were talking. He was aware of all this, and of Tito's preparations. Tito hit himself while Chico was staring down the stairs. Chico heard the steps and something told him it was the Law.

"Hey, man, the people! It's the people!" he said. Angel jumped like an unloosed spring, hit the roof door, knocked the latch free and started to run, but Tito stood on the landing yet with the spike in his arm.

"I ain't wasting my stuff," he declared.

"Cool it, they're coming fast!"

"Let them, I ain't running from nobody," said Tito, and he kept booting himself while the steps in the hall grew louder. Chico left him there and ran, following Angel over the rooftops. Coming down a stairway at the end of the block, they saw the patrol car and a crowd around Angel's house. Finally Tito came out between two policemen. As they flung him into the car, Angel said, "There's plenty of rooms in the Tombs."

They walked away then and parted at the corner, Angel going off to the movies, Chico toward China's house. The excitement had reduced his high, but even if it hadn't he would have gone to see her.

As soon as she saw him China knew and wouldn't speak. In the living room, she turned, saying, "I was waiting all day. I don't know why you came at all."

"I'm sorry," he said, and added, "But you know why I came."

"I know why you didn't," she said. "Because you and your friends got money for dope."

Her tone angered him. "Sure, I had to have it," he replied, "because I've got the habit—but I hope to be cured."

"Then you're going to the hospital?"

"No, if I go, my mother'll find out about it, and that's not ever going to happen."

"But . . ." said China, and stopped for the front door opened and her mother came in. When she showed no sign of leaving, Chico lit a cigarette and that brought back part of his high. He got rid of the cigarette quickly, and then it began: he started to nod. China noticed this and gave him a warning poke. He had to keep his eyes open now.

"Got to keep them open," he told himself and tried to listen to the conversation. His mouth was dry as cotton; his skin was itching, crawling, and he had to scratch. Yet he couldn't do that, for China's mother would notice and he'd give himself away. He fought it, and fought to keep his eyes open, but the itching grew worse, the desire to nod increased. The itching became unbearable and he knew he had to give in. "I've got to, got to," he said to himself, but the thought of China's mother held him back. "I'll read," he told himself, thinking he could keep from nodding and forget the terrible itching. But when he picked up a magazine he began to nod and dropped it. Then he felt the horrible itching again. Sitting back now, he straightened up and swore he wouldn't nod any more, but something was wrong, he was too thirsty, his mouth was parched—yet he didn't want to move, only wished to nod. The feeling became overwhelming and he found himself going off, then caught himself once more, and was gripped by the urge to scratch—his whole body was itching, crawling. China's mother was staring at him. Fear made him sit still, and he waited for her to say something but she turned away and spoke to China again, then excused herself and left the room.

He had been aware of no sound, though the windows were open, but now there was a dread silence as China turned to him. Everything seemed to stop in that instant and he could not meet her angry stare, he wanted to run from the house; but all she said was, "We better go downstairs."

They entered the park without speaking. Then China turned to him, saying, "Did you have to come up full of dope and let my mother see you like that?" Her voice went through him like a knife, putting his nerves on edge. It was all he could

do to keep from hitting her, then he mumbled, "All right, I'll straighten up."

"Yes, you always say that."

"Don't you believe me?"

"No, I don't believe anything you say. Next, you'll be telling me you aren't high."

"I'm not so high."

She laughed a forced laugh and he smacked her face. "So I am," he said, and hit her again. She began to cry and instantly he was sorry. This seemed like the end, what they had been coming to for so long. But she didn't walk away.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean that at all."

"Oh, you tell me the same thing every day. You're always sorry, but you don't mean a word you say."

"Then I'm a liar, I suppose? I suppose I meant to hit you?"

"You tell me so many things, I don't know any more," she said.

"I heard a rumor that you were going to quit me. Is that true?"

"I don't know anything about the rumor."

"Then how come certain friends of yours are talking, spreading the word that you're walking out cause I'm taking stuff?"

"That's a lie. All they said was, what do I get out of you? But they know what's happening. You haven't stopped like you said you would. I don't know what to do with you."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. I don't want to talk about it."

She spoke the last so sharply that he knew there was no use going on. He felt ashamed too.

"I'm telling you for your own good," she went on. "I'm going to quit you if you don't stop."

"Well, I'm quitting, I'm serious."

"I don't believe you."

"All right, ask any of my friends. They'll tell you."

"They're the same, they're all liars. They want to see you like they are. Look at Angel, how he is."

"How do you know all this?"

"People told me."

"Who are all these people watching me?"

"Just friends of mine."

"You call them friends?"

"I don't understand you. I really like you but you're changing like all the rest. You're going to get in a hole."

"Does that mean you won't be caring for me any more?"

"I like you, but I don't like that stuff, that dope."

"But I'm giving myself to you, not the stuff."

"You're not like yourself, you used to be nice. Now you're dead, you're asleep. You better stop or you're going to be like the rest. Haven't you any will power, don't you respect your mother? You'll break her heart. Oh, please stop."

"But I've promised, I've been trying to break it."

"Well, let's see you. Now I've got to go."

"Wait a moment."

"No, I've got to go."

"Why be like that? It's early yet."

"Maybe for you it is, but I have to go—I didn't come out tonight for fun—and you don't have to walk me home." As she said this she turned and started to walk away. He grabbed her, then let her go.

"Okay," he said, "have it your way."

He watched her go, thinking, I should stop for her sake and my mother's, but I haven't got the habit anyhow. When I feel I'm getting it, I'll stop.

chapter 26

FOUR DAYS PASSED before he saw China again, and then it was only by chance. He was coming from Angel's house when he walked into her. She knew he was high but didn't say anything about it until they were in her house. As soon as she closed the door, she asked him where he had been keeping himself.

"I've been sick," he answered. "I broke my habit."

"That isn't new. You come here saying that every time, but just look at yourself."

He didn't care to, yet he turned to the mirror, hardly able to open his eyes. "I don't know what it is," he said, turning back to China and watching the expression on her face. "You're not mad at me, are you?"

"I don't know. All I can say is that you used to be nice, and that you and your mother and me are going to get hurt."

"I know. I can't fool you or my mother. She's wise to something but she's not around enough to realize."

"But I do, and do you know what? This is your last chance. If you don't stop, I'm going to quit you."

"You are?"

"Yes, I like you, I love you, but I don't want to see you like the others."

"But I told you I'm quitting the stuff. That's why I haven't been seeing you. I locked myself in the house to keep away from it."

"Then why do you look like this? Look at you."

"I'm sick, that's all. When you're trying to kick it, that's what it does," he lied, watching her, and knew then that she believed him. He kissed her. As he let her go, she smiled, settled back against the couch and didn't speak. That he'd deceived her didn't matter, it was always that way now, but so long as she believed in him, he felt he could believe in himself, felt that sooner or later he'd straighten out. With those thoughts, he nodded off again, his head on China's shoulder.

"Wake up!" he heard her say

"I'm not asleep," he said, lifting his head.

"No?" She was looking into his eyes and he could not hold her gaze. "You're still sick?" she asked.

"Yes, I feel real low. And what you said didn't help."

"What did I say?"

"That you were going to quit me." He was deliberately playing for sympathy to divert her attention from his condition. Besides, he knew he couldn't keep his eyes open any longer and it was better to leave.

"Even though I don't want to," she said, "I will if you don't stop—but stop using it for my sake." As she began to cry again, he stood up. "Don't cry," he said, "it'll be over one of these days."

Later, when he came down from his high, he thought of how he had deceived China and felt ashamed. Over and over again, he was doing the same thing. He couldn't be trusted, everything was a lie now, his whole life, and all because of the drug. He knew he wasn't beating the habit; it had him and he was getting worse, unable to command any part of himself,

unable to fight back. At least in the beginning, he had struggled against it, had promised to make amends, and meant it. Now he knew those promises were pure fantasy, no more than wishful thoughts.

He lay on the couch at home and told himself, "I'm going to go straight. I'll keep away from her for a while and then come back and tell her I broke my habit. She'll be the happiest girl in the world when I do. I'll have money, be dressed all cool, and she'll say, 'Where have you been?' I'll just tell her I've been away and broke my habit. I'll have a gift for her, money for a show. First, we'll go there, and then I'll pitch a ball at my house. Yeah, I won't even touch the stuff again, I'll move away where I can't get it and never come back here." He slept then, with the daydream intact.

Several days later he went to China's house while almost blind. She had never seen him like this before and thought he was drunk.

"You've been drinking," she said.

He almost laughed. "Come here, it's not that I don't fancy that stuff and you know it."

She understood now. He began to nod off, but she didn't intend to let him sleep. "You should be ashamed of yourself," she said to him. "Look at you!"

She hadn't screamed but it sounded that way to him in his state, and he jumped. "Shut up before I smack your head!" "You're a pest, don't bother me any more, I want to sleep." Even while he was talking he felt himself going off, and closed his eyes, but her voice kept at him; he heard the usual threats; she was going to leave him, quit him for good. The words didn't bother him at all, only the sound of her voice, as if she were screaming in his ear.

He opened his eyes and found her standing over him. "Let me see your arm," she said.

"What for?"

"Never mind, just let me see it."

"You don't have to look at it, there's nothing to see. What's the matter, don't you believe me?"

"You must have a guilty conscience," she answered. "I know you're using it yet and all your friends are."

"So what? I can hang with anyone, no matter what they do, but that doesn't make me the same as them."

"No, it only makes you a dope fiend, that's all."

That hurt, hurt so much that he wanted to rise and knock her teeth out. He felt he could kill her for saying that, but he didn't lift his hand against her. He knew this was the end. "Ail right," he said, "I won't put my hand on you—but I'm no dope fiend."

"What would you call yourself then?"

He couldn't say anything, but he thought: That's what the hell I am.

It was still early; his high had gone and he remembered what had happened, but it didn't seem to matter now. The only thing was the drug. He left the house and walked the streets, still thinking of China's words. She'd called him a dope fiend, and hadn't given him a chance. Now he'd show her, he thought. A woman was coming down the block and her pocketbook caught his eye. He let her pass, then began to follow. Unexpectedly, she went into a house. In a way, that was better, safer; calmly he followed her inside. Halfway up the first flight of stairs, the woman stopped and turned but Chico kept on. When he reached her, he ripped the bag from her hand and ran back down as she screamed. Three blocks away he stopped running and walked the rest of the way home.

Someone was standing over him. It was dark now, night, and all the faint cries of the evening were making music and he listened, the figure standing above him no more than a dream figment. It was his mother. She spoke again, asking him if he wanted to eat, but mention of food made him feel nauseated and he shook his head.

"What's the matter with you? You never eat any more," she said with concern.

"Oh, I do during the day—all the time, that's why I can't eat when you come home."

"And you're getting so thin. You're all bone."

Those words warned him. Was she getting suspicious too? He looked up but it was too dark in the room to see her eyes. He couldn't say anything, and they kept staring at each other. He knew then that she was wondering, putting two and two together, but she didn't come out with it. Most likely she didn't know what was wrong. He heard her sigh then, as if to

herself. "If I didn't work, I'd be home to take care of you. You're on your own too much and you're too young for that. Sometimes when I'm at work and I think, I feel like running home. I always think of something dreadful happening to you."

"Aw, don't worry about me, I can take care of myself," he said.

"Yes, you only think you can. If things were different. If this neighborhood . . ." She never finished, for the front door slammed and Chico's stepfather called out. She almost ran, and Chico sat up, rubbing his face, angry. "He calls her and she flies," he said to himself. "Who the hell is he anyway?"

chapter 27

THE DAYS PASSED and he didn't see China. He wasn't interested any more and didn't think she was. He didn't blame her but now that it was over he began to hit the stuff hard. It seemed as if he was doing all the time, living for it from day to day, hour to hour; everything he did was governed by it. There was no escape, no wish to escape. Every moment belonged to it, or to the things he did to get money to buy it—that was the worst part of it, keeping up with its demand, for there was always the next day to think about. But Angel and he managed. They were always together now, kicking off, or planning a new way to get money. There were a hundred different ways, and always the pawnshop, or a fence to get rid of stolen goods, people in the neighborhood who'd buy anything as long as it was cheap.

As for China, she was someone of the past, a face, a voice, and no longer real. He hadn't seen her and he wasn't going back. She wouldn't have him anyway, he thought, but a week later she came to the house. He was with Angel and they both were nodding off in the living room when she knocked. Chico heard but paid no attention. Angel came to immediately. A moment later he shook Chico violently.

"What's wrong?" Chico said.

"Hear that? Someone's at the door. Christ, let's hit for the roof!"

Angel was frightened, so was Chico. As the knocking sounded again, they stood still, looking at each other. Then Chico smiled.

"Hell, that's China," he said. "I know that soft knock. If it was the Law, they'd kick the door down."

"How sure are you?" Angel asked. Fumbling in his pockets, he finally produced a cellophane packet of heroin.

"I'm sure, so don't fling that stuff away," Chico said, but Angel moved toward a window. He wasn't taking any chances.

"Don't throw it, we're going to need that," Chico warned and started for the door.

"Hey, you're not letting her in, are you? I thought you were through. Damn, all a broad has to do is knock and you go flying."

Chico didn't answer, thinking of China coming to him. He hadn't expected that, and now he wanted to see her again. He knew what would happen if he spoke to her though. It would start all over again, the old arguments, promises, tears—and he didn't want that now, didn't care any more, for there was no feeling left in him. He heard Angel then.

"Go for that door and I'll throw the stuff out the window," he said. Chico abruptly changed his mind, saying to himself, "I don't want to be bothered."

As he tiptoed back, Angel smiled. "That's more like it," he said. "Hell, for a moment, I thought you were blowing your top."

"Yeah," Chico said, and he thought of China. The knocking had stopped and he heard her footsteps on the stairs, going down. As they faded, he said to himself, "She'll be mad," and didn't care.

Next day she came again. He was alone, reading a paper. When she knocked, he closed his eyes until she left. For three days in succession she came and he never answered. Then on Sunday, when she knocked, he stopped his mother before she could open the door.

"It's China," he whispered, "don't let her in."

"Why not? What happened between you?"

"Nothing, I just don't want to see her. Tell her I'm not around," he said. Listening, he heard China ask for him and

his mother's answer. Seconds later the door closed and his mother turned to him.

"Why didn't you want to see her?"

"I've got my reasons," he told her.

"But she's a nice girl. I don't see why you're chasing her away."

"Look, I don't want to see her, Mom, so forget it."

She looked at him, keeping her thoughts to herself. And China didn't call at the house any more. She'd gotten the idea, but it wasn't the end yet.

Several days later, he saw her on the street and would have turned back but she caught his eye. When she stood in front of him he asked her how she was and what she had been doing.

"And where have you been?" she said.

"Been busy," he answered, but she knew better and said no more. Both were uneasy and, unable to face her any longer, Chico finally said, "Well, I'll see you again." It was a lie, and they both knew it. She looked at him knowingly, as if she realized this was really the end. He knew definitely that it was and didn't care. All he worried about now was how to get money to feed his habit.

chapter 28

SUNDAY was always a bad day and he didn't have enough of the drug to hold him till next morning, so he went to Carmen's house. She wasn't there, though, and he hadn't expected her to be, for he'd heard she'd gone off with someone again. That left him in a bad way and he had to cut down to carry himself through till Monday.

By morning he was sick and Angel wasn't to be found. Finally, in desperation, he decided to do it alone and took the subway downtown. By then his stomach was going around and around, his head was aching, his nose running. Once off the train, he felt worse, and the crowd of people in the street annoyed him. When someone brushed against him, he wanted to fight, but his mind was on a certain store and he kept praying that he'd get a coat there.

By the time he reached Rosenberg's he was so sick that he thought he was going to fall. He took the elevator to the seventh floor. When he got out he saw a woman look at him and follow him with her eyes. As he went among the racks of coats, she was still watching. Her eyes never left him, and finally she came over and asked him what he was looking for. "For a lady's coat," he said, and gave the size. He was taken from rack to rack and shown various models. All the while the saleslady kept talking and he wasn't listening but was thinking he was going to get away with it. One coat he pretended to like. "It's for my mother—a present," he said.

"Then you want it?" the saleslady said. She had her hand on it, ready to take it from the rack, but he noticed the floorwalker watching him now. The man was standing near the elevator, and something warned Chico. He said to the saleslady, "I like the coat but I'll have to think it over." With that, he glanced toward the floorwalker again and saw that he'd moved away from the elevator and was phoning—which was warning enough. He decided to leave and hurried toward the stairs.

From Rosenberg's he walked directly across the street and entered another department store. This time he had to get something, he told himself, had to, for he was really desperate now. As soon as a saleslady came up, he took his time; he had to make it look good. But the saleslady tried to hurry him from the start, pressing him so hard that from annoyance he was moved to anger. The state he was in didn't help, either, and at last he turned on her, saying, "Look, your job is to wait on me, no matter how long I take." But it was the wrong way to handle her. She came back at him and, before he could stop himself, he said, "Look, you bitch, if you don't want my money, I can go somewhere else." Shocked, she turned and called the floorwalker loudly enough so that he came on the run.

"What's the trouble?" he said, and when the saleslady explained, Chico told him what had happened but it didn't go over, for he threatened to call the police.

Once outside the store, Chico felt his stomach start to turn again and his head was splitting. He didn't think he'd even make the subway, but he had to. And as soon as he sat down in the train on the way back he thought of his best suit. He didn't want to pawn it but had to now, for there was nothing

else he could do. When he got home he took the suit from his closet, hurried to the nearest pawnshop and threw the suit on the counter.

The clerk looked it over, taking his time. By then Chico was so anxious he was shaking, thinking of the money he'd get. Finally the clerk looked up. "How much do you want?" he said.

"Ten, that's a good suit."

The clerk shook his head. "The shoulders are faded."

"No, that's just the color of the suit," Chico protested.

The clerk looked at the suit again. "I'll give you seven."

"Seven, hell, I won't take it!"

"Well, we'll say nine, that's the highest I can go."

It was the highest he would go, too, and Chico accepted, grabbing the money as the clerk counted it out. He thought for a minute of grabbing the suit, which was still lying there on the counter, and running from the shop, but he didn't. Outside in the street, with the money in his hand, he felt better already.

He started for Ray's house immediately. A block away he walked into Angel and Icepick. Before he could speak, Angel said, "Man, where were you? We scored! We scored!"

"You've got stuff?" Chico said, thinking of the money he'd put in his pocket.

"Have we got it? Hey, listen to him," Angel said.

"Well, let's go. I'm hungry for it," said Icepick.

"Are you dealing me in?" Chico asked.

"Sure, ain't you my boy? Come on," said Angel, and they started for his house.

They readied the works in Angel's room and hit up. It was good stuff and Chico felt it go to his head immediately. He was last to go, and now he heard Angel and Icepick talking, their voices growing louder; the light in the room had dimmed, their voices were jumbled now and he couldn't follow the conversation. "Man, this is good," he said to himself. He could hear Icepick clearly, saying, "When you yearn for it, that's when it hits you real bad. When I haven't got it, I can be sitting inside an oven and I'll be in a cold sweat. You got to get it then, got to get it. Then you hit it and you feel it in your stomach like food."

Angel's voice cut in, far away but very clear. "One time I felt I could kill a guy. He handed me a lemon and I went

looking for him. There wasn't nothing in the stuff but sugar and I'd hustled like mad to get that money for it. Didn't get a buzz even, the stuff just hardened in the spoon and it wouldn't cook up. That's right, no good, no good at all."

He went on talking but his voice was fading, and Chico caught himself nodding now. The door slammed and he jumped. Icepick had just left. Chico's eyes closed again and it seemed but a second later when Icepick returned with half a watermelon and two quarts of ice cream. The three of them began eating the ice cream and watermelon. Then Chico nodded again as Angel and Icepick began talking about how much they could shoot up.

"Nobody in the world can shoot more than this kitty," Icepick bragged.

"Yeah, you don't know what shooting up is," Angel answered. "You got a baby habit."

"You're talking like a weak-mind."

"I shot a sixteenth and eight caps of C one time."

"That's being a damned fool. You wanted old man Death knocking at your door."

"You know, man, how long it took me to hit one time? I had collapsed veins. An hour and a half and I lost it, so I took a friend's radio."

"You're a rotten mother-jumper."

"Hell, you got a nerve calling somebody rotten."

"Okay, cool it. Pass me a piece of that watermelon, Angel."

A knock sounded on the door and before any of them could move Jackie walked in, a junkie whom they avoided whenever possible. Angel glared at Icepick. "You left that door unlocked. I ought to throw you through the window!"

"Hey, nothing happened. It's only Jackie, the stud with the long nose."

"Lock that door!"

After Jackie obeyed the command, he turned around. "I see you boys are having a good party and I'm kind of sick."

"How'd you know we were up here?" Icepick asked, ignoring the hint. "I'm going to beat you blind yet—but you got a good-looking girl."

"Knock it off about her."

"Yeah, if I was her, I wouldn't have you, you goddamn dope addict."

Angel stirred. "Now I say knock it off!" he said to Icepick. The conversation veered again and they discussed the times they had gotten sick—for the benefit of Jackie.

"When I got busted, they took me down to the Tombs," Icepick said. "You never saw a man sick like I was. I laid on the floor for a whole week, and when I walked in the joint the feds said I'd get a shot to keep me going. So I went to the guard and asked, and he says, 'Hey, fellows, come over here.' All the junkies came around and the guard says to me, 'Say that again,' and I said it again. So one of the junkies says, 'Did you ever hear of cold turkey? Well, that's what you get here, you kick your habit without getting no stuff.' Yeah, so all I did was dream of the land of junkies and horse and shooting up tons of it till I got out. I nearly died ten deaths."

"Talking like that, you better leave me alone, I'm sick," said Jackie, and he began begging for a shot and, as usual, Angel gave in, then related how he'd once been caught on a roof.

"I was cooking up some stuff, bending over and this dick kicked me dead up the can. Damn, you never saw a kitty scramble up like I did and, when I got up, I didn't know what to do, cause he had this big pistol in my face and said, 'Don't move or I'll shoot.'"

As Chico was listening to Angel his voice faded and another voice came in, high, almost singsong "My route was drinking wine, then reefers. Horse came next, I snorted and finally took the needle, sometimes one drug, sometimes two. Yeah, reefers at eight and you're coming down at nine, and you hit it again and are satisfied; you've enjoyed yourself. You wake up to another day, look out the window and say, 'Well, here's another day, what'll I do? I'll cop some stuff, see my old lady, stay with her all day, go to the movies, and hit the streets again.' The lights are on then, there's a different crowd. You dig the time, get high again and cool it. It's routine."

That was Jackie speaking. Chico recognized his voice at last when Icepick began again. He mentioned his "old lady," something concerning jealousy, a muddled statement which he tried to clarify. Chico leaned forward, listening; Icepick paused, then went on:

"You analyze things. When I'm thinking most times, well something happens and nothing adds up. Something was said by the other party, and you figure and figure, and figure such

is the case. She showed up at such and such a place at such and such time and someone was hitting on her. So such and such is the case; it's catch-as-catch-can. In cards you figure like that. You turn everything upside down. So you figure out a way, but are your conclusions right—to the point where everything will be all right? . . . Jealousy. Okay, you like her, and it's the first time. But you tell her, 'If this happens again, look out. You can't two-time me again.' You do it real smooth. You got to know the family real well, dig the situation—when Pop comes home, when Mom leaves this place. You give her the benefit of the doubt. So she says she went to meet her mother. You drift to this place, dig the ground, catch somebody, sound him, then you know what to do. So you plan your revenge on the basis of what happened. Life is real complicated, and sometimes things don't just add up right. Some night she'll question you about something and you'll walk away and never know what happened."

Icepick went on but his voice faded and Chico couldn't follow his confused peregrinations. His eyes had closed and he kept thinking, That was real stuff, almost pure. He was blind, stoned, in a state between sleep and consciousness, with brain and senses dulled, balanced on the edge of another universe. But he stirred once the voices ceased, opened his eyes to a dimmer room and saw the others and a tiny flame moving beneath a shiny spoon, the three of them closed around it and the light of the bent candle-flame in their eyes—an unreal scene which he seemed to be witnessing from a great distance. A whispering started up then and fear like a dark spreading lava moved around him. They were conspiring, they were not his friends at all but three guys who looked like them and were planning to kill him. They were whispering over the candle and he wanted to cry out—then he heard Angel—it was Angel now—say, 'I'm going to hit first, I'm a no-good greedy son of a bitch but I want to be blind.'

Chico laughed inside himself and saw the bent flame that moved beneath the spoon grow smaller, become a pin point of fire, and finally die out altogether. There were no more voices, no sounds, nothing in the vast space he drifted through now. For time didn't exist, and when he opened his eyes again he had no idea of the hour or how long he had been in the room. Something had changed, too; Jackie was no longer there,

Icepick lay stretched across the bed and Angel had gone. "He's inside," Chico told himself, then saw an almost shapeless object on the floor.

Angel was lying there, his arms bent under him in a grotesque position as if someone had felled him with an axe. Something was wrong, Chico knew, or Angel would have been on the bed. His eyes closed, but a sound from somewhere outside brought him back again. He stood up, and the room swayed, the light moved, changed, darkened and brightened, and Angel there on the floor looked dead.

Something was wrong, Chico realized that before he touched him. "He's dead," he told himself, and then shook Angel, saying, "Wake up! Wake up!" But Angel didn't move, he was stoned, completely out. Chico, too, was still high, but he took the works from the table, put them in his pocket, and tried to rouse Angel. He needed air, needed to walk. That much Chico knew, and he lifted and carried him out of the room, half dragging and half carrying him up the stairs. On the roof Chico fell and cut his arm, gashing it on a piece of glass, but blood didn't matter. He got Angel to the parapet between his roof and the next one and sat him there—still out—then went back down for water and poured it over him. There was no response, he was still stoned. Chico was frightened; he thought Angel was dead, but he didn't leave. He tried to get him to his feet to make him walk. That was important, and finally, as he kept shaking him, Angel began to mumble and came to.

"What's the matter?" he said belligerently. "What the hell did you wet me up for?"

"You were knocked out, man."

"Yeah, you're lying, I just took a little!"

Angel was almost shouting now, and Chico had to warn him. "Cool it, people will hear," he said.

With that the fight went out of Angel; perhaps he realized his condition. Chico helped him to his feet and walked him around the roof. Around and around till his head began to clear.

"I'm all right now. I feel like seeing a show," Angel finally said, but he was still high, his eyes half-closed.

"Okay, we'll see a show," Chico said. It didn't matter what the picture was, he only wanted to nod again, nothing more. But they had to face the stairs and he didn't trust Angel, nor

his own legs. Moving cautiously, they managed to make it down the steps, though, and went off to the nearest movie.

Chico lit a cigarette and immediately his high came back again and everything went reeling. It was the same as if he had hit himself with the spike and he was frightened, for nothing quite like this had ever happened before—not so long after hitting up. Finally he closed his eyes and nodded. Angel had already gone off. Later, Chico came to and knew he was sick. The drug they'd taken had probably been doctored. Angel was still nodding, but he didn't bother him and left him there to sleep off his high.

Home again, Chico vomited in the bathroom, then sat down at the kitchen table. His brother came home unexpectedly early. Chico heard steps on the stairs and didn't realize it was Paulie till he opened the door. As soon as Paulie saw him, he gave him an odd look and Chico knew his thoughts. It was in Paulie's eyes, but he said nothing and went into the living room. Chico wanted to get up and go to his bedroom but that would set Paulie thinking. He sat there, straight now, trying to fight off the sick feeling, and Paulie came into the kitchen again. He looked and kept looking, without saying anything, and Chico began to nod in spite of himself. His eyes were heavy, closing, then the feeling came, as if someone were clutching at his throat and he had to get up and go to the bathroom to vomit again.

He didn't realize it, but Paulie followed him. When he turned, Paulie said, "So you're high, you're using the stuff after what I told you," and with that he hit Chico and knocked him against the wall. Chico wanted to strike back but he couldn't raise his arms; besides, he knew what Paulie would do to him, so he pleaded, told him he was sick, and asked for one more chance.

"Okay, one more chance," Paulie said, "but if I ever catch you again, I'm going to bust you down to your shoes."

Just then their mother came home. They didn't hear her till she spoke from the bathroom doorway. She had heard their voices and wanted to know what had happened.

"Nothing," Paulie said. "He took my clothes and tried to get smart about it."

This had happened before, and so she merely shook her head and went back to the kitchen to start supper. Chico tried to go to his room, but Paulie stopped him with his hand. "Next

time," he warned, "I'm going to mess you up personally. I'm watching and I'm going to really bust you."

chapter 29

FOUR DAYS LATER, coming down the stairs in his own house, Chico passed an open doorway. A radio was playing and he heard a woman's voice in a room beyond but he saw no one—and that caused him to stop. In the next moment, even though frightened, he stepped into the room and looked around quickly. He saw a wristwatch lying on a table and was moving toward it when footsteps in the back room froze him to the spot. He was caught and he knew it, but suddenly the footsteps ceased. After a long, painful pause, Chico grabbed the watch, then slipped out of the room as quickly as he had come.

Fifteen minutes later, he had pawned the watch and was entering Ray's apartment, where he met Kiki. He'd heard about her from Angel but had never seen her, though she was living at Ray's house. "His old lady lets her stay with them, but I can't figure the angle," Angel had said, and Chico remembered his words now as he stepped into the apartment and saw her. He'd expected a hag; instead, Kiki was young and not hard to look at. After sizing her up, he asked for Ray.

"He's not here," Kiki answered, "but you can wait for him if you want."

"How long will he be?"

"Only a few minutes."

He noticed the marks on her arm and realized she was an addict. Her eyes confirmed it; she was almost nodding. He wanted to ask her then but he couldn't get the words out. Finally he said, "Do you hit up?"

She nodded, smiling faintly.

"You just learn?"

"I wouldn't say so."

"No?" He was more than curious now and asked her when she had started.

"It's about three years."

He was surprised and almost doubted her, for she didn't have the look of one who had gone that long. They talked about their habits then, and finally she said that Ray had some new stuff.

"Yeah?" he said.

"Did you try it?"

"No, I didn't have any."

"Do you want a little taste? I'll fix it up if you do."

It was an invitation impossible to resist and he didn't refuse. She fixed him up and he told her he'd straighten her out. Hearing that, she smiled and looked at him in such a way that he knew she was interested in him. He was interested, too, liking the way she smiled, the way she talked. She seemed nice, the kind who would understand anything, and she wasn't a kid. He could see that she knew a lot and that one could discuss anything with her and know she would understand.

They were still talking when Ray came in. He gave them a quick look. Jealous, Chico thought, but he didn't know the situation and didn't really care. A moment later, Ray was all business. Chico had come up for horse and he bought some from him, then asked Kiki if she wanted any. Not then she didn't, she said, but he could help her out when she got sick. Her remark surprised him, but it was the way she looked at him that made him wonder. There was an intimation that seemed to promise much—many things, new things. It was like looking through a crack in a door that led to another world. Her acceptance of him, in spite of his age, made him sense a new importance in himself. She saw that he wasn't just a kid. He was certain of that or she wouldn't have made the offer. And that meant that she liked him. She'd be easy, too, being a junkie, easy to take if he could get her high.

As he was thinking of that, Ray, who had left the room, re-entered and Chico turned to him. Ray asked for Angel and they chatted for several minutes till Chico finally decided to leave, not wanting to give Ray the idea that he was interested in Kiki.

But he had no need to be concerned over that. When he saw Angel again and told him what had happened, Angel said, "You don't have to worry, she's just a whore." If Angel said so it was probably true; still, Chico wondered about Ray. He wasn't letting Kiki stay up there for nothing, not someone like her.

Next day Chico went up again and this time Ray was in. Kiki was there, too, and Chico saw she was sick and, remembering what she had done for him, he offered her some from the five packs he bought from Ray. She accepted, and he waved away her thanks, saying, "I didn't forget what you did for me yesterday." She gave him that same look again that seemed to mean so much. It was as if they had come to an understanding already. Both of them shot up then. Ray had left after giving Chico what he wanted, and now that he was high Chico didn't think about him.

They discussed their habits and Kiki mentioned how at one time she'd been able to get high from a single cap. "I used to take it just for the fun of it," she went on; "now it ain't fun any more. I'm going to break the habit."

Chico knew what she meant. What she had said was the very words he might have used, and her experience, her feelings were his. They'd both gone through it and this gave him a feeling of being close to her, closer, in a way, than he'd ever been to China. But she'd said she was going to break her habit; he thought of all the times he'd promised that, and then said, "The only way I'll ever bust it is if the cops or dicks catch me. I'm not man enough to go to the hospital myself."

"I can kick mine by myself," Kiki said.

"Yeah?"

She saw doubt in his face and answered, "That's right. If you switch to C you can do it."

"Who told you that?"

"A guy I know. He's using C now."

"He'll be using cocaine forever," Chico said. "Anyway, I don't trust C. It jellies your blood, clots your needle, and that's the way you drop dead. It's not for me. I'm particular, anyhow, I keep the works clean."

"It's best to always use your own," Kiki admitted. "I had a boy friend who didn't care whose works he used and before he knew it he broke out with bumps all over his face. He was afraid to go to the hospital and he had to keep on using the stuff, so he ended in the hospital anyway, and didn't come out for three months. After that he tried to stop me from using it, but he was always lending me money. And then he went back on it himself."

"I know," said Chico. "You think you have it, but it has you. It makes you do things you never did before, and you

don't care if you get caught or not as long as you get the money to buy the stuff."

"You'd do anything," Kiki admitted, and she looked at him with eyes grown small. "Anything at all."

"How'd you get started?" he asked.

"It goes way back. I used to run around with a bunch of boys—club-fighters. I'd help them, carrying their pistols, hold it for a boy at a dance. Then my mother kicked me out when I was eighteen, so I started to hang around a bar and smoked pot. First I started drinking, then one of the boys came on the scene and said, 'Do you want to try some of this?'—and I got a nice kick-off. I snorted and I liked it."

"And now you can't stop."

"I live from day to day—but I'm going to break it."

"How come you stay here?" he asked.

"Well, I've known Ray's wife good, and I pay my way. That's why Ray don't care."

They continued talking for a while longer and then Kiki nodded. Chico went off, too, moments later.

The next time he went up, Kiki was sick and had nothing on but a sheer slip. She was lying on the bed, and he asked if Ray was in.

"He's not here but he left the stuff with me," she said. "How much do you want?"

He told her and she got out of bed, taking it from under her pillow. Through the transparent slip, he noticed her body but he was sick himself and it didn't bother him. She watched him take off, then asked for a taste. He saved some from the spoon and watched her now. Shaking as she got ready, she tried to hit herself with the spike and missed. Five times and she missed each time. By then she was angry and cursing. He thought she was going to cry. Finally she looked at him and he came over.

"Do you think you can get a hit?" she asked.

"If I can't," he said, "I'll chop my hands off."

He began to rub her arm till the vein came up. He was close to her now but had no feeling, no desire. She got her hit and thanked him, adding, "After this, I want you to hit me up all the time."

And he did, whenever he went up there. She began to give him stuff, too, and then he knew she really liked him. But he

didn't know about the other men, till one day he went up there and she wouldn't let him in. "Come back later," she called out, and he went downstairs to wait. Later, a man came out of the house and he ran right up. Kiki let him in and acted as if nothing had happened. When he told her he knew what was going on, she merely shrugged, saying, "I thought you knew."

"Knew what?"

"That I get my money that way. How else could I get it?"

He wasn't really surprised, for he knew why she needed the money and Angel had said she was a whore. Anyway, she had told him already. He remembered her words—"You'd do anything, anything at all." Yes, she had told him and he should have realized. But it didn't matter, he wasn't coming up there for her.

A week later, sick for the drug, he went to Ray's, intending to ask him for credit, but Ray wasn't home. Worse still, Kiki didn't have any stuff. Knowing something had gone wrong, he asked her what had happened.

"I've been goofing it up so he won't leave any with me," she said. "And now I'm sick."

"Yeah, you're sick and I'm dying. Where's Ray gone to?"

"I don't know."

"How about Rose?"

"He left some with her but she went out and didn't say where."

"What are they doing, playing hard to get? What's happening around here?"

"I don't know," she said, watching him. "But we're both sick and have no way of making money."

"And that's what buys it."

"But I have an idea."

"What kind?"

"Well—all you have to do is get in back of a hallway—and I'll bring this man in."

"What man?"

"Any man."

He understood then, but he said, "What am I supposed to do?"

Without answering, she got up and took a blackjack out of a bureau drawer. There was a gun in the drawer, too, and she showed it to him, saying it was Ray's. When she put it back,

she handed him the blackjack and said, "All you have to do is hit the guy in back of the neck and grab and mug him."

By the way she spoke, it seemed like a casual everyday event with her, but he was frightened. "Are you sure this will work out?"

"Yes, if you do what I tell you."

"All right, I'll try," he said, and she began to dress. He waited for her and when she finished they went downstairs, walked about and finally stopped in front of a bar.

"I'm going in here," Kiki said. "Wait by the window and dig the stud I talk to, he'll be the one."

With that, she walked into the bar and he stood by the window to watch. It was about three o'clock, not many patrons in the bar. He saw her order a drink, and within a minute a man walked up to her and began a conversation. Sizing him up so he'd know the man, Chico went back to the house she had pointed out to him and waited on the stoop.

Half an hour later Kiki turned the corner with the man. Chico froze when he saw them, then ran into the hall where he waited behind the inner door. Ten minutes passed and he was in agony and couldn't stop shaking. Just when he felt he couldn't stand up any longer, he heard the outer door open, and tensed. A moment later the inner door opened and Kiki entered. As she passed him, she nodded her head. He felt an overwhelming fear, but he was so sick he no longer cared if anything happened. The nun stepped past the doorway then and Chico swung the blackjack. He failed to catch him right, and the man turned and struck him in the face with his fist, hollered and struck again before Chico could make a move.

"Watch out," Kiki screamed, and she jumped on the man from behind, grabbing him about the neck. As his hands went back to break her grip, Chico struck hard with the blackjack. Two blows were enough, but he hit him twice more to make certain and by that time the man was caving toward the floor. He went down heavily with a thump, striking the floor face first.

Kiki was at him then, straddling him, her hands moving over him. She had his wallet now and she stood up as a door opened somewhere above. They heard footsteps and they looked up to see a woman leaning over the rail of the first floor landing and peering down.

"What happened?" the woman said, and lifted her hand.

They saw her holding a heavy iron bar, and didn't answer. But she knew now, she had seen the man lying on the floor.

"What are you doing with that man?" she asked.

Neither of them answered. "Just walk out," Kiki said, and Chico followed her. That was all, but once outside they ran to the corner, then walked again for five blocks. They were safe; no one had followed, nothing happened. They went to another pusher Kiki knew and bought the stuff.

Back at her house, they hit up, using her bed to sit on. Finally they lay back together. Chico was so high that he felt gone, his mind empty, eyes closed; he wanted to sleep, but Kiki was talking about the man she'd lured into the hallway. Chico heard her say, "That guy thought he was really going to get it, he was one of them kind of guys, all anxious."

Her words seemed to rouse him now and, coming away from the edge of sleep, Chico said, "You shouldn't have teased him. You don't do that to me cause you know what I'd do to you."

"I know," Kiki answered, and he looked at her. They were facing each other on the bed and he saw the expression in her eyes. It meant only one thing, but he was too high and ignored her. Anyway, she'd be here any time he wanted her. He closed his eyes and she began to talk again, about another incident which he knew was meant to rouse him, but he never moved nor opened his eyes. Finally, thinking he was asleep, she said, "Are you listening to me?"

He heard but didn't answer; his hands came out, he reached her, there was no resistance. He opened his eyes and saw her watching him like a sleepy cat, waiting, not speaking any more, just watching. His hands kept moving, he was coming awake and at last he said, "Are you ready?"

"What do you mean?"

"Look, don't do me like that man. Let's get down to business."

She stopped playing then and without a word got up from the bed and stripped. He lay there, watching. His excitement ebbed again and when she lay back on the bed once more the urge was all but gone. Mechanically, then, he tried, failed. "I can't," he said sleepily. "I was only goofing in the first place. I didn't want it."

"Well, I didn't want it, either," she said. She got up to put her slip on, then lay down again with her back to him. His

eyes were already closed. The last sound he heard was her voice saying, "Wake me up at four."

Fifteen minutes later, Ray walked in and found them together on the bed. Angry, Ray glared at Kiki, wanting to know why she allowed him to lie on the bed. "I don't like the idea," he said, then turned to Chico, who hadn't bothered to get up from the bed and, in fact, was going to sleep again when he was shaken roughly. As he opened his eyes, Ray said to him, "Since when do you buy from somebody else and come up here to get high? Don't I treat you right?"

"Cool it, man. You weren't on the scene, that's all. And I was sick. Waiting for you, I could have died."

Ray understood that because he was an addict, too. He was still angry, Chico could see that, but it was because he'd found him on the bed with Kiki. When Ray left the room, Chico looked at Kiki. "He doesn't like me being with you, does he?" he said. She didn't answer that, only stared at him. Chico looked around. There was nothing there to hold him and he started for the door.

chapter 30

AFTER THAT, Ray never seemed to mind Chico coming around and staying with Kiki. He became much friendlier and sometimes, when Kiki was out and he had to go some place, he asked Chico to stay and take care of the customers, warning him, though, about taking on any new ones. That way he was careful, selling only to those he knew so he wouldn't get caught. But he was hitting the stuff too hard, taking so much dope that he always appeared high. Too much for his own good, Chico believed, but that way it was better for him.

His wife, Rose, was a junkie, too, a bad one. Chico never paid much attention to her, but one day he went to the house and she was there alone. After he bought the stuff from her, he started to leave, but she told him he could shoot up there. As soon as he took out the works, Rose remarked, "You know, you keep them real pretty."

"Cause I'm a pretty man," he said. "Everybody hasn't got the same blood, either. I've got that sweet kind."

She laughed, and for the first time he really noticed her. Once she had probably been pretty, even now she seemed attractive and he had a feeling that she was playing up to him. But he wanted the stuff, that was what he'd come for and he got it ready. She'd already said she was going to get off too, but now she asked if she could go first.

"Nay, here's the man. If anybody's going first, I am," he said, and did himself up. He got his hit and shot it all in at once.

"Why didn't you boot it?" she asked.

"Too greedy," he answered.

"Well, you're the first I saw who don't. It's a nice sensation."

"Yeah, when you've got the time"

He put his belt around her arm, tightened it, and she asked him to hit her. He tightened the belt more till her veins swelled and watched her. She looked good now, real good, and he wanted her. He hit her and she jumped, saying he'd hurt her. "Well, do you want me to hit you, or . . ." He didn't finish; in the next moment he caught the vein, caught it deftly, but there was no come-back. Her blood wouldn't come up, so he removed the syringe and left the spike in her arm. When he put the syringe back her blood began to rise quickly. He kicked it then, and a minute later she started going down, her eyes rolling in her head. He let it creep up on her slowly but she heard a sound and suddenly jumped, frightened.

"It's only a couple of air bubbles running around, so relax," he said. When he took the spike out, she was stoned, her eyes were closing and she was beginning to scratch herself. He cleaned the works, put them away in his eyeglass case. She was flat on her back and out when he left the house.

After that he played up to her whenever he got the chance, for he knew she liked him. He had a way of hitting up that gave her a better high, she told him, and he made her pay for that with free fixes.

Three days later he went up with Angel and the three of them shot up. Afterward, feeling good, Chico relaxed and watched her. She was sitting with her legs crossed and didn't seem aware of his eyes. Now he was telling her how nice she looked—anything would have looked nice then—but she didn't

listen. Instead, she talked about the worst high she ever had.

"I've had a lot of bad ones," he remarked. She looked at him.

"You're a real junkie," she said.

That angered him. She noticed immediately and moved close to him, touching him. He felt like having her then but he said, "That's enough for today," and stood up to leave.

"You're going?" she said.

"Yeah, I've got business to tend to," he said, and walked out with Angel, who hadn't said a word.

On the stairs Angel said, "Why don't you leave that jive bitch alone?"

Chico laughed. "I'm not thinking of her," he replied.

"Yeah, that's why I can't find you any more. You're fooling around with her and that other bitch. They're both poison. One or the other is going to get you a knife in the back."

"Man, I'm playing it for all it's worth."

"But it ain't worth that much."

"Maybe not, but it's okay when they give me the stuff and you share it. That's all right. I don't hear you complaining then."

"Okay, but what about Ray? You don't think he'll smell a rat?"

He smiled at Angel. "You know what?" he said. "He's a lane, I can push him around like a baby now and he don't say boo no more. Besides, I'm working for him, too, I've got it coming three ways."

"And he don't know?"

"He's too high all the time. That kitty is going to end up dead in the gutter. He's too greedy for his own good."

"You're getting a little greedy yourself, if anybody asks," said Angel, and he walked on ahead now.

Chico laughed and thought, He knows I got too good a thing and he don't like it.

The following day Chico went back and Ray asked him to stay in and take care of the customers, then left. In the evening he returned to pick up the money. Chico asked him where Rose and Kiki were, for they hadn't been around all day.

"Out," said Ray, and left again. Chico knew something had happened then and didn't care, for he had stuff, all he wanted for the next two days. On the third day Ray and Rose came back. Kiki wasn't with them. Chico knew what had happened

and didn't ask for her. She could have been dead in the gutter for all it mattered.

Meanwhile Ray had brought some stuff back from a big dealer, a new man, and he asked Chico if he wanted to try it to see how good it was. It was good stuff; it hit Chico right off. Ray decided to cut it and cap it up. Watching him, Chico noticed that he had the shakes and finally pushed him aside, saying, "Let me do that." Ray just sat there and watched while Chico went to work cutting the horse with milk sugar. When he finished cutting, he began to fill the caps while the radio played soft music. He wanted it quiet now, but Rose was in another room and it sounded as if she were banging the furniture around. The noise irritated him and finally, when Rose entered the room where he was working, he looked up and she said out of nowhere, "I heard you snatched a lady's pocketbook the other night."

"You're so jive, you try to be slick," he answered.

"But I'm wise to you."

"You're wise to who? The only way you can be wise is to . . ."

"Better have some respect," Ray cut in. "You're talking to my wife."

"So she's talking to me, and I'm trying to work," Chico said. He thought of what Ray had said about respecting her—that was a joke, for Ray didn't know the passes she had made at him. Chico went on working again, and Rose, sending him a dark look, left the room.

Ray lit a cigarette and began to talk about becoming a big dealer; Chico listening, realized he was dreaming, talking big because he was a little high. When he couldn't take it any more he told him, "Yeah, keep up the pace you're going at and you'll be with me with your tongue hanging out."

Taking this as a joke, Ray laughed and went on talking. It was the same line: he wanted to go in big and sell to pushers, he was tired of dealing with ordinary junkies—there wasn't enough money in it for him. Chico listened as he went on with the work and finally Ray drifted out of the room to take a nap. There wasn't a sound in the house now, for Rose, too, had gone off to bed.

Later, when he finished capping the stuff, Chico hit up again, fell asleep on the sofa and awoke at two in the morning. He should have gone home but it was too late now. He turned

the radio on softly and lit a cigarette. Voices came from the kitchen. Ray and Rose were up.

Finally Rose came in. "Do you want something to eat?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"You were mad today."

"And you spoke out of turn," he said.

"But I was joking."

"Then forget it."

"You still don't want to eat?"

"No."

Rose went back to the kitchen and Chico got up and decided to leave. Someone knocked on the door. He answered it and a tall blonde was standing there, good-looking, expensively dressed—not the type that Ray ever dealt with, but she asked for him.

Ray came into the room and Chico saw he knew the blonde, for she was a junkie and had come for the stuff. She didn't look at Chico while Ray went to get it, didn't say anything, giving him the feeling that she considered him a piece of dirt or less than that. He cursed her under his breath, thinking, You're just like me, bitch, no better at all. You're just a pale-faced junkie with a snooty puss.

Ray returned with the drug then, handed it to her and nodded to Chico. "If I'm not here any time you call, Chico will take care of you. He's working for me," he explained. The blonde glanced at Chico, making no acknowledgment of any kind, and turned to leave.

"Bitch!" Chico said after the door closed. "Who does she think she is?"

Ray laughed. "Anyway, that's beautiful stuff."

"What's she doing around here? I never saw her before."

"A friend sent her. She mostly comes real late. A night-club singer. She's got it real bad, too. How would you like to get in bed with that?"

"How would you?"

"I have."

"Yeah, you have."

"Okay, you know better, but one night she came up here without any money and desperate, so . . ." Ray turned on his heels then and walked inside.

He's lying, Chico thought; that never happened. And yet

he knew it was possible. Ray would make a deal like that, and the very fact that a girl like her had even come here, a girl who belonged to a world he didn't belong to, only made believable what Ray had said.

Chico left the house then, but instead of going home he walked the streets. He ran into Angel, who was down and on the prowl, a little angry because Chico hadn't been seeing him.

"Are you living up in Ray's?" he asked.

"Good idea," Chico answered. "Man, I'm working it, that's why I'm there."

"Yeah, that's why you forget your old pal."

"That's what you say, but I don't forget." Chico was feeling good now, and took out a package. "That ought to straighten you," he said.

Angel's eyes popped. "How much you getting?" he wanted to know.

"I'm taking him for plenty. He's so high most of the time he don't know. You want to go up there? There's eats on the table."

Angel shrugged. Except for buying what he needed, he didn't particularly care to go, but he went along. On the way Chico met his brother. Paulie stopped him. He knew Chico wasn't high, still he wanted to know where he had been keeping himself.

"I've been at Angel's house," Chico explained. "Mom knows that."

"And she expected you home tonight."

"I'm coming home."

"See that you get there." Paulie walked away, but he knew what was going on.

They went on toward Ray's house again and, at the stoop, Angel changed his mind about going up.

"I'll wait for you," he said.

Nothing could persuade him, so Chico went up alone. Ray and Rose were still in the kitchen. They were surprised to see him. By that time they had cleared the table, but Chico wasn't hungry any more. For one thing, his brother had upset him. Paulie'll wait up for me, he thought, and decided it would be better to leave. After a few words, he stood up. "I'll see you in the gutter," he said.

Ray laughed at the remark, but Rose gave him an odd look as he went to the door. He slammed it after him and we

down the stairs to the lower hallway where he stopped, seeing a shadow move. His first thought was of the Law, but it was only Angel.

"Just done myself up behind the cellar door," he said. "I couldn't wait."

"You're really greedy," Chico told him. Angel laughed. They walked out together and Chico started for home.

At ten o'clock next morning he was back at Ray's. He had to keep knocking before anyone answered. Finally Rose came to the door, half asleep and rubbing her eyes.

"What took you so long?" he said, walking in.

She didn't answer but went to the bathroom. Chico stood in the living room and looked at Ray sprawled on the folding couch, mouth open, breathing heavily. Chico looked around the room. On a table were four caps. He could hear water running in the bathroom. Ray was still asleep. He'll never get up, Chico thought. In the next moment he moved toward the table, swept the caps up and dropped them in his pocket.

Rose was still in the bathroom when he lit a cigarette and sat in a chair on the other side of the room. Waiting now, he was scared. It was a crazy thing he had done but he couldn't undo it. He was thinking of it when Rose said from the bathroom, "How come you're so quiet this morning?"

He couldn't answer, thinking she knew already that he'd taken the caps. A minute later she came from the bathroom in the same dirty and wrinkled slip she'd worn in bed. He was disgusted, seeing her like that but, barely able to keep her eyes open, she didn't notice.

She looked toward the couch where Ray was and back to Chico. "What did you come so early for?" she asked.

"It's not early.

"Well, come back later anyhow."

"Okay, but aren't you going to give me something?"

She thought about that, remembering how he had acted toward her the day before. Finally she put her hand into her brassière and took out four caps and gave them to him.

"You're treating me all right," he said, thinking of the other caps he'd stolen. It was as if she had read his mind. He watched her turn and stare at the table, a puzzled look on her face. "They were there, I put them on the table," she said, and looked at him.

"Well, don't worry me about them," he said. "That's some more money you have to account for with your old man."

Puzzled, she was still looking at him. He was frightened now, but she didn't accuse him, too befuddled yet. He got ready to shoot up the four caps she'd given him, needing this badly, and she waited, watching with sleepy eyes. As he got ready to hit himself, she turned away—she always did that now. "Why don't you take your time?" she said.

"I'm in a hurry." He found the vein and shot everything in.

Finished, he cleaned the works and Rose, who was almost falling asleep, rushed him to the door so she could go back to bed again.

chapter 31

HE WENT BACK to Ray's house later but there was no response, even after he banged on the door and called out. He climbed to the roof to wait and found Johnny, one of Ray's customer's who'd been goofing off. Chico asked for some stuff, saying he was sick.

"Can't, I did it all up."

"Yeah, damn, I don't need your stuff, I was just trying you out to see."

Johnny looked hurt now. "You know I'd give it if I had it," he said, but Chico didn't believe him.

"It's cause I'm working for Ray that you say that."

"It ain't that."

"It ain't anything but."

They came down from the roof then. It was too hot up there and the stoop was shaded. A few minutes later Ray came along. He saw Johnny and he shot him a dark look, saying, "When are you going to pay what you owe me?"

"I'll pay, I'm a real gone guy. Don't I trade with you a lot?"

"All right, I know you're a good guy, but come around some time. I know what's happening. You got credit from me, so you started on another pusher." He turned to Chico. "I'm going up. Are you coming?"

Chico followed Ray inside. On the stairs, he asked him about giving Johnny credit.

"He's good for it yet," Ray explained. "And I've got to keep him coming around."

They reached the landing and walked into the apartment. Ray went through the rooms without speaking, a worried look on his face.

"You weren't here before," Chico said.

"No." Ray glanced around as if expecting to find someone, then walked out, saying, "Take care, I'll see you later."

As soon as he left, Chico put the radio on, lit a cigarette and sat down to wait. He fell asleep and woke to a sharp insistent knocking. Thinking it was the Law, he hurried to the bathroom. The stuff was kept there so that it could easily be flushed down the toilet bowl. He looked around and came back into the living room and asked who was at the door.

"Joan."

He was puzzled for a moment, then recalled the blonde night-club singer. Remembering how she had acted toward him, he smiled to himself now. This was something he hadn't dreamed of.

"Who?" he asked.

"Joan!"

"Joan who?"

"You know mc. Will you please open?"

He opened the door slowly and stood there blocking the way.

"You know me," she repeated. "Don't you?"

He didn't say yes or no but stepped aside and allowed her to come in.

"Ray sent me," she hastened to say. "He said to give me four caps. I'll see him tomorrow."

Chico stood looking at her and thinking of that other time. He wasn't a piece of dirt now. And she had to look, had to talk to him.

"Well?" she said when he didn't answer.

"Well, what?"

"Aren't you going to let me have it?"

"No, bitch, so you better get out. Ray didn't send you, either, and he told me to trust nobody."

She was sick enough so that what he said didn't mean anything, and she began to plead, saying he had to understand,

promised him money if only he would let her have some stuff now. "I'll give you anything you want," she said.

This was what he'd been waiting for all the while and he laughed to himself, then said, "Bitch, if you saw me in the street, you wouldn't say boo to me, but now you can talk, you know I'm alive."

She didn't say anything to that, merely watching him and wondering. Then, as she began to plead again, he told her to sit down. Yes, he'd give it to her all right, but first he'd make her suffer till her tongue hung out. Readying the works now, he said, "Well, let me get up a good fix." He cooked the drug while she watched. "Have some?" he said. "Aw, but this little bit won't do you any good so you better not take it."

She came forward, her face changed expression; he thought she was going to start crying and ignored her, slowly drawing the drug up from the spoon. She thought he was going to take it himself and this was the exact impression he wanted to create, but he said, "Here, you need this more than I do."

As he handed it to her she was all but panting, and thanked him. "There's no thanks due," he told her. "You owe Ray some money, that's all."

She nodded her head quickly, prepared to shoot up, and he stopped her. It was the moment he'd been waiting for. "You gave somebody something the last time you were broke," he said. "Is that right?"

The blonde hesitated, but she knew what he meant and appeared frightened, expecting to have the drug taken away from her if she didn't give the proper answer. She had to understand because this had happened before with Ray, though the circumstances were slightly different. Ray just wanted what he knew he could get, whereas Chico wanted to humiliate her. She knew that, too, but fear of losing the drug made her nod her head. "Yes," she said. "I did, I was sick."

"Well, you just give Chico something too," he replied, and waited to see if she'd protest. She merely looked at him, then put the needle in her arm and began to boot. He waited and when she finished, said, "Any objections?" " "

Shaking her head, she gave him back the works, and began to undress as if he weren't there. Nothing was said but she knew where to go, what to do. It seemed to him she had done it a thousand times before and was so weary of it that it had

no meaning for her. But it was clear that she didn't want to do this. He could see that in her eyes and in the way she turned her face away. It reminded him of the first time he saw her, and it seemed that even now he couldn't touch her, couldn't do what he wanted to do—which was to hurt her.

Instead, when it was over, he felt as if nothing had happened at all. That was the way she acted, too, as she dressed again. Then she left. As she closed the door after her, he called out, "I'll see you again!" but she didn't answer. He heard her footsteps on the stairs fading away.

A while later, Ray came in.

chapter 32

WHATEVER HAD HAPPENED between Ray and his wife was soon straightened out again. Chico knew that when Rose returned in the middle of the week. Nothing was said to him but he gathered that Kiki was behind it and thought her gone for good: but she too drifted back to the house. That was all the better for him. He could still play up to them, getting enough stuff from both to keep going without much trouble. Besides, there was Ray, who depended on him more and more. So he had it coming from the three of them—but Ray was using the drug heavily and didn't seem like the same person any more. He avoided Kiki as much as possible and she avoided him. No doubt Rose had warned them both.

Almost a week after Kiki's return, Chico was walking along the street when Rose came from a store and called to him. "Coming up?" she asked.

He nodded. Her question was direct, simple, and yet it held a veiled invitation. He smiled to himself because he knew she still liked him. Not that he wanted her, but it was something to feel that he could have her almost for the asking. And every time when he was there at the house she asked him to hit the main for her and, when they were alone and high, she was inclined to become intimate and suggestive. He'd fended her

off, but in the back of his mind he knew something would happen sooner or later if he kept going up there.

All the way to the house, he kept thinking of that, the way her arm felt when he held it, the way he himself felt as he pushed the needle in for her. It had become almost a rite and a symbolic act, fascinating him and providing him with a curious sensation which he could not easily explain. For at the moment of penetration, when the needle struck, he always tensed and his whole body was roused by a powerful force. At the same time there was the wish to possess, a sense of possession itself and, afterward, a kind of release—no matter if he hit himself first, or her; the drug did that, dissipating desire. He was well aware of it, but he thought if he didn't shoot up at all it would be different. It would be very simple, for he knew how she would respond once the drug began to act on her. It was an idea, anyhow, and he was ready to carry it through.

When they reached the top of the stairs, Rose pushed the door open and stood there, unmoving. Chico stood behind her. Over her shoulder, he saw the same thing she did. Ray and Kiki were lying on the couch, their bodies contorted, their faces turned toward her, expressionless and numb. They saw her and suddenly jumped up, speechless, waiting.

Rose ran into the room. She screamed as she ran, and Ray flinched. Kiki stood there a moment more, then fled into another room. But Rose wasn't concerned with her, she ran at Ray and Chico saw her hands go up. When they came down, Ray staggered back, his face torn by her nails and bleeding. She came at him again and he waited, but this time as she closed in he kneed her in the belly. Chico heard the wind go out of her, saw her bend like a jackknife, then go down in a heap.

Ray stood above her now, his hair loose over his forehead, face white except for the scratches that were welling blood. He touched his face and looked at the blood on his hand as if wondering what it was, then lifted his eyes and saw Chico standing in the doorway. They stared at each other until Chico turned away. As he started down the stairs, a clamoring started up, a welter of excited Spanish voices filled the hall, doors opened and people gathered on the landings. He walked down slowly, looking at no one, ignoring the babbling that grew louder by the moment.

Later, he went back and it was the same old hall, empty now

but for the cats that haunted it, a strange indefinable odor peculiar to itself, and the refuse which attracted no one's attention. He knocked and waited, and finally Ray came to the door, his long face wearing a more morbid look than usual. He had done a reasonable job of doctoring himself up and there was no blood, only the long thin scratches faintly concealed by a coating of talcum.

"Okay, come in," he said. "The war's over."

Chico went in and sat down.

"Where is she?" Chico asked.

"Who?"

"Rose."

"She walked out again."

"What did you expect?"

"Anything at all. How's my face?"

"Not too bad. What happened to Kiki?"

"I told her to take a long walk. A real long one." Ray sat down and let out a long sigh. "I'm always screwing up," he went on. "But it's that bitch, Kiki. I swore to my mother I'd never touch her again, but she won't let me alone. This time I'm really messed up, getting caught like that."

"You're messed up in more ways than one," Chico said. "Keep it up and you're going to goof yourself out of existence."

"Maybe you're right," Ray replied and stood up, a thoughtful look on his face. After a moment he left the room and returned carrying the works. "I'm going to get stone-blind," he said. "Do you want a fix?"

Chico nodded. He knew this was coming and didn't blame Ray for wanting to forget his troubles.

As it had the first time, the trouble blew over and Rose came back and made up with Ray. But Chico didn't see Kiki for almost a week. When she returned she avoided him almost completely, staying in her room most of the time. But Ray told him the story. Kiki had tried to pickpocket a drunk and got caught and whipped.

Chico thought it was over between them now, but he was wrong about that. The next time he went up to the house, he heard Rose's voice beyond the door. "Don't stand there and lie to me," she was saying. "I'm going to kick you and her out."

"What are you talking about?" Ray protested. "You don't know what you're saying."

Chico knocked then and heard Rose say, "Be cool, somebody's coming." She opened the door and Chico said hello, but she didn't look at him. He turned to Ray and saw how unwelcome he was, but he needed some stuff. When he asked for it, he got it quickly enough. He wanted to shoot up there, but Ray hurried him out, and with so much tension there, he was glad to go. Still, instead of going downstairs, he waited behind the door. He heard Ray say, "Shut up, do you want everyone to know about this? Keep it to yourself." There was no more talk, only footsteps that faded away in another room.

Chico went downstairs, hit up behind the cellar door, and then sat on the stoop. Kiki came along. She glanced up at the windows and, seeing Chico watching her, assumed what she thought was a casual look and came over. But he saw the concern in her eyes, not that she was interested in Ray so much but it was convenient sleeping in the same apartment with a pusher. She had probably been sleeping in his bed again, too.

Now she casually asked if Rose was upstairs.

"I don't know," Chico said.

"Are you going up?"

He shook his head and smiled to himself at the way she was trying to get around it. Next thing, she'd ask him to let her know, if he did go up, whether Rose was there or not, but he didn't allow her to get that far. Instead, he stood up and said, "If you want to see Rose so much, why don't you go up and see if she's there?"

She looked at him in a way which made him wonder. Did she know that he was lying? It seemed that way, as if some sharp instinctive sense warned her that he was sending her into a trap. She glanced up toward the window again, anxiously, with no attempt to conceal anything. Yet she had not mentioned trouble. Perhaps she thought he knew.

She walked away, slowly, as if she had no place in mind to go.

After that day she never came back to Ray's place again. But there were the bars, even the streets; probably she had a room now and on occasion he saw her after that, always with a different man, so he knew what she was doing. And always she pretended she didn't know him, passing him by. But sometimes she couldn't recognize him. On those occasions she was

high and he knew what was happening by the way she dressed, for her good clothes were gone, her body a frail shapeless wreck. Finally he didn't see her any more. No one knew what had happened to her, either.

As for Ray and his wife, Chico continued to see them, but Ray was becoming careless. He wanted more money and that meant more customers, new faces. Sometimes when Chico was up there he saw the new ones and wondered. For there was always fear of the Law. He warned Ray, but Ray didn't seem to care. The habit was devouring him and the only thing that kept him going was the fact that he was a pusher. That way he at least kept himself supplied. But too many customers were tramping the filthy stairs toward his door and someone had to notice sooner or later. Eyes in the neighborhood were watching, keeping tabs, and finally it happened.

Chico had gone home after lying around all day in Ray's house, then, having eaten supper, he started back. Night had fallen and a wet mist crept through the streets from the river, sealing the day's savage heat within the wall of houses. The streets were crowded with people seeking relief, so that it was like a holiday, the air rampant with a thousand echoing sounds, the sidewalks and stoops jammed with people who did not know where to go, for there was no escape.

Chico sensed the uneasiness that welled up through the evening's carnival. And turning into the block where Ray lived the feeling became a vibrant force, for there the crowd was greater and something was happening. People were milling about in front of Ray's house, all talking at once. As he approached the noise died, a hush fell over the crowd and everyone stood still, for the door had opened. A man came out on the stoop. Then Ray between two more men, and finally Rose. The crowd stirred, and from its throat an ominous note sounded but no one did anything, no one attempted to interrupt the parade that had begun at the top landing of the house and ended at the curb where Ray and his wife were pushed into a waiting detectives' car.

Chico had moved up, and now, on the edge of the crowd, he felt someone watching him and turned to find a man whom he didn't know. As he met the man's eyes, he knew immediately that this was the Law. He smelled it on him, knew he was watching and listening, and he edged away and lost himself in

the crowd which had already begun to break and scatter as the car that held Ray and Rose moved off from the curb.

chapter 33

CHICO went to Angel's house the next day and found him in a nasty mood.

"So you're back," Angel said, knowing the Law had caught up with Ray and Rose. "Yeah, you forgot about me, and now that you haven't any friends you come around looking for stuff."

"I'm not looking for anything," Chico said. "And I took care of you plenty, so you can't kick."

"I can't?" Angel looked up, glaring. "Who're you trying to jive?"

From the moment Chico came in, he had felt on edge and now, hearing this, he knew something would happen and that he'd get the worst of it. He moved toward the door.

"I'll see you in ten years," said Angel.

"That's a bit too soon for me," Chico answered. He slammed the door behind him and started down the stairs. Two flights below, he heard Angel calling and stopped, but there was no sense in going back. "The way I feel now we'll only battle," he told himself, and went on.

Outside, the streets were deserted. It was close to noon and the hour hung heavily, the sun madly blazing. With nothing to do, no one he cared to see, Chico went home and found the shades still drawn. It was almost cool and very quiet, the whole building drowsy. He felt a tiny flicker of hunger, but when he thought of food nausea mounted to his throat. A glass of milk was all he could take, then he went to the bedroom. It was darker there, cooler, more remote, like a subterranean crypt as he stood at the door and surveyed it. The illusion remained intact as he crossed to the bed. It was good to be enclosed by shadowed walls, and he felt secure without knowing why as he sank down upon the bed.

Sleep wouldn't come and he didn't ask for it, but now he experienced a sensation of floating as he stared at the ceiling—

and already he was on the margin of that other universe of fantasy. Its great pit yawned, the air about him quivered, his body lightened and his brain swung free of its moorings. This was like sleep, like death, another life; as he stared upward he imagined he saw a star twinkle, then two, then dozens and suddenly they were beyond counting. And as suddenly they evaporated; cracks in the ancient yellowed plaster appeared instead, like rivers winding nowhere across a desolate plain, then minor tributaries appeared, lacing a network that finally involved that whole world above. To follow the intricate designs was to journey endlessly toward nowhere, to have no goal but the joy of the empty, unmarred landscape. There were no temptations, involvements, conflicts, fears, only the resignation of escape.

His spiraling thoughts carried him away and the maze of cracks no longer suggested totality. Hinted shapes appeared, animal and human, but always dismembered, a fantastic array now, distinct and yet transitory, elusive images that disintegrated almost as they formed, suggesting the shapes of life but never quite assuming a final state. He grasped at these and lost them, till the shade, moved by a phantom breath, allowed a beam of light to enter the room. His eyes fastened on this now, following the whirling specks of dust in its golden channel till a secret hand moved the shade again and dimmed the room.

His eyes found the ceiling once more and from unexplicit fantasy his mind leaped to another plane, where more and more often he dwelt of late. For he dreamed of money, enormous piles of greenbacks which were his, and saw himself as a king with a glittering palace, owner of all the drugs in existence and with no habit to worry him. In kingly raiments then, he viewed himself walking with his tax collector just as a duke approached and fell to his knees. With a generous wave, he bade the duke arise, and all three entered the palace.

A huge box stood in the throne room, the gothic letter H in pure gold fixed upon it. He opened it and put his hand in to lift a pile of the purest heroin man had ever seen. And this was his. There was more, too; in a separate box a golden clamp to tighten upon his arm and raise the veins; another box of exquisite design contained a golden spike that rested on a silken cushion, a spike that never would bend nor break; and special

ointment to prepare and soothe his arm, and a specialist to administer the drug.

He was ready now; but it was always his pleasure to gaze at the boxful of heroin, to smell it and feel it burst like a white flame in his brain. He was pleased, too, by those preliminaries of lighting the match, lifting the golden spoon, the boiling process in which water and drug mixed to form the precious fluid. Even loading the eye-dropper he took as his own task—and then was ready for the specialist to take over.

The spike touched his arm now, a faint pricking sensation and he knew it had gone in. In a moment the drug swirled in his brain, hit him and he was high and fell to a cushioned seat. Heaven now, and his servants came bearing great trays of fruit, luscious grapes, shiny apples, and fried turkey—whole fried turkeys which he sampled and waved away, to be given to the poor. Satiated and stoned, he sipped water now from a golden goblet, and when he looked around he saw everything was gold, and thought, I'm the richest king in the world. Yet he didn't know his name, no one did.

But what did it matter? For he was completely stoned and had to lean back in his brocaded chair waiting to nod forever. But a duke hurried into the palace to inform him of war portending with the People of the Cliffs. "They have sent a message," the duke explained, "and if you don't surrender, they're coming to get you."

Casually, he waved the threat away. "Tell them that if I don't destroy them, I'll kill myself," he said, which was taken as a declaration of high courage by the duke and all the others of his court—and it prompted him to send a series of messages stating his intentions of conquering all the world.

He then arranged a session in which fifty high-class men and women participated—a fabulous entertainment. Some snorted the drug from golden spoons, others through golden straws and from mirrors of the same metal, some from caps of gold. Everyone got petrified, and this party continued for weeks and weeks. With only one discomfort. Headaches made the guests take to bed too often, but he, the king, was spared that, his specialist providing a leaf to chew which cleared his head and made sleep unnecessary.

But such revelry had to end, for there were the People of the Cliffs to deal with yet. They had sent another message of defiance which he could not allow to pass, and he ordered up

his First Army. To make his soldiers brave, he issued ten sticks of marihuana to each man—and everyone got high, crowding the palace, wandering in its halls and collapsing everywhere. It was then necessary to call up the Second and Third armies, and so he sent them forth but they could not find the enemy. Instead, the enemy found them by coming around the mountains.

"Before they catch me, I'll get high," Chico told himself, and he boiled an enormous amount of heroin and drew it up with his golden spike. Hordes were fighting at the palace gates as he tied himself with a pure golden silk handkerchief, and finally one of the enemy slipped through, all bloody and waving a crimson sword. He came on, paused, moved on again with an evil smile that broadened with each step he took, his sword raised high. But Chico was ready; standing, he hit himself with the golden spike and watched the blood rise—and everything turned red, walls dilated with the flaming color, the marble floors were spattered, the great halls of the palace spewed it forth and the throne room drowned in a fast angry rising whirlpool. Darkness fell, the daydream faded out, and Chico slept the afternoon away.

When he opened his eyes again, he recalled the fantasy immediately. It was the wildest yet. Thought of the golden spike brought a smile to his face. "I must have been stoned to dream all that," he told himself, yet he couldn't recall shooting up. Nor before lying down on the bed, not since the distant morning.

He left the house, to walk the streets. With dusk a cooling wind moved off the river, with darkness the lights of the city sparkled, and the streets that had dozed through the long tawny hours beyond noon stared again, freathed, and erupted into life. Sharp cries split the air, laughter and music responded to the gathering volume of motor traffic and all at last was welded into one confusing roar.

He had walked to the river alone and there in the soft dark had taken the drug and nodded. He awoke with a feeling of being watched—but no one was near. In spite of that, he moved on through the dark streets that slanted up from the river, with a feeling that someone was following. Once, soft footsteps sounded behind him and he ran; and once he heard the heavy breath of someone in pursuit—perhaps the Law, perhaps his brother, and yet he saw no tangible evidence of

either. To escape, he fled through alleys, and took familiar short-cuts he could have walked through blindfolded, till he gained the lights of his own immediate neighborhood. But even there he felt unsafe, nervous in the dark hall of the house as he climbed the stairs.

It was early for him to arrive, a surprise to his mother; pretending fatigue, he went to his room. He felt physically exhausted, but a contrasting mental excitement prevented sleep.

By midnight the house was quiet, everyone asleep. Finally Chico put out the light. As he turned over, he heard a sound as if someone had moved a chair in the kitchen. He heard it again, and then a sound like a pot cover being removed, followed by the scraping of a spoon. It was his mother, he believed, yet he was frightened and couldn't move. A moment later he distinctly heard water running in the sink. But no light was on in the kitchen and he hadn't heard his mother get up. A ghost? He turned his eyes from the doorway and stared at the window, blinking. When he closed them, the total darkness became terrifying, and the noises continued from the kitchen. Now plates were being set on the table, and he was almost certain it was his mother. But why didn't she put the light on? Unable to answer that, he closed his eyes again, and heard the water in the sink go on once more. Someone was washing dishes now, he heard the clatter, then suddenly this activity ended and the house was quiet.

He waited. Just as he was about to relax, a scream from outside made him jump. In a moment he was at the window. Two shadowy forms skirted the corner and disappeared; he heard another scream, then an awful stillness enfolded the street. Now it was completely desolate and, oddly, no one appeared at a window. There was no response to whatever had taken place. And it was this that stunned him, making him wonder if he had seen or heard anything at all. The thought sent him back to bed, where he covered himself completely. "Someone screamed, I heard it. But who? What happened down there?" he asked himself. Then he recalled the activity in the kitchen. Quiet there now, but someone had been there. Someone . . . he thought, and dozed off.

With the first morning sounds he came awake and went out to the kitchen. No plates on the table, none in the sink; everything as it should have been. A few minutes later his mother appeared, ready to prepare breakfast.

"What are you doing up so early?" she asked.

He ignored the question, and said, "Were you in the kitchen last night? Did you get up from bed to wash dishes?"

"After I went to bed? What for? I'd already washed the dishes. But why do you ask?"

"I thought I heard you," he said, and went back to bed again.

chapter 34

ANGEL was sitting on the stoop as he turned the corner, looking straight toward him. Chico was certain he saw him, but he got up and entered the house. With that, Chico stopped in his tracks and went home again. Then he thought it over and decided that Angei hadn't seen him—but he felt too tired to go back. It was easier to lie in bed, less complicated to get high by himself. He can come to me, Chico thought, and readied the works.

After hitting up, he slept through the day while the myth of life went on outside. He woke in the shadowed room with a feeling that nothing had transpired since morning. Time, in a sense, had ceased; there was no onward flow now, only a vacuum, and he was centered in it. He had found an oblivion, an escape, a wondrous release from all clamoring demands. And yet there was an element of fear, for he sensed a final terrifying darkness, a whirlpool which might suck him down completely. The street sounds rising softly to the window of his room reminded him of morning, of a thousand mornings past—of life spinning relentlessly on, and all its gaudy promises, the bright intimations that flash across the landscape of youth. But he had turned his back on these and, without knowing it, had sought a kind of death. Now, instinctively, he rebelled, fearing the immensity of this isolation that threatened to envelop him completely. Voices outside, staccato sounds, these stabbed through the soft enfolding shadow and aroused him, while the four bare, ugly walls, suddenly transformed, became the disguised and distorted reason for his fear. A dark

room in an empty apartment—it was no more than that now that made him rise and hurry from the house.

Later, he stood on the corner, watching the flow of traffic. Soon enough, he'd be getting sick. Already his habit was making its demands and his mind was centered upon a single theme—how to get high again.

Restless, he was about to move off when Icepick turned the corner and greeted him. There were no preliminaries; Chico asked Icepick immediately if he knew how they could get high.

"You want to go to a real shooting party?" Icepick said.

Chico hesitated, wary of such affairs, knowing how easy it was to get caught, then said to himself, "The hell with it, I'll get myself a high and cut out."

"Well?" said Icepick.

"Where's it at?"

Icepick grinned. "A couple of fags are running it, but they're okay."

"I don't feature that."

"Neither do I. Are you coming?"

"Where's it at?"

"Uptown a way," said Icepick, and they started to walk. A half-hour later, they stood before a door. Icepick knocked and a girl answered.

"What do you want?" she asked, looking at both of them.

"Arthur asked us up," said Icepick.

Doubt was reflected in the girl's face and she hesitated. Arthur came to the door. A dark, effeminate man, he greeted Icepick effusively and extended his hand to Chico when Icepick said he had brought a friend. The door closed behind them then and they entered a crowded room, dimly lit with soft colored lights. A record was playing, couples were dancing, swaying, rather, in close embrace, obviously high.

They found seats and watched, not saying anything. Chico was beginning to wish he hadn't come when he noticed the girl who had answered the door. She was standing across the room and staring at him. A moment later she walked over and he sized her up. Nice body, he thought. Looks like a whore.

"Hello, what's your name?" the girl asked.

"Chico."

"Want to dance, Chico?"

"Why not?" he said, and stood up; they moved together, close. She was a good dancer, and not afraid to grind. What

was more, she roused him, and he thought, I'm going to lay this chick. When the record ended, they sat down and he asked her name.

"Milly," she said.

"You're not Spanish?"

"No."

"What are you?"

"Nothing," she said, then quickly: "Let's get high?"

"What's the rush? Let's wait a little longer till things shape up."

"But we don't have to wait. I've got a lot of stuff."

This was an unhopd-for opening, and now that he knew where he stood he answered, "I've got none."

"Well, I'll fix you, honey. Let's go in the bedroom."

"No, let's bug the people a little."

"All right, that's a crazy idea," she said. All the while he'd been watching her. She was different from anyone he'd ever met, attractive, well put together, with taut moist lips which she persisted in wetting—a habit which excited him and made him want to tongue-kiss her. These physical assets were one thing, but what attracted him more was the way she spoke. So slow, so cool, he thought, watching her, like she'd never get excited, never get busted. It's like she knows what's happening all the time. Now she was speaking about those on the floor, and his eyes went back to them, the dancers, the queers, the ones high on pot, coke and speedballs.

Previously, the odd wallpaper had caught his eye, and now Millie called it to his attention. This time it hit him forcefully, and the scene—a Roman arena repeated over and over again—came to life as he stared at it. He was completely fascinated, strangely excited by what he saw—noting in detail the arms of the gladiators who faced each other, one gripping a triton and chain, the other holding a net defensively. The one with the triton had wounded the other and stood above him with face lifted. But far more striking was the one who sat above in judgment, the soft, jowled Roman citizen who gazed down from the sunlit seats into the shadowed pit and laughed as he hooked his thumb, voting death to the wounded one. The violence of the scene created indefinable echoing intrusions within Chico but, more, there was delight as if he were a participant, the very one who sat above and decided that a man must die. A desire to possess such power overwhelmed him, and an all-

embracing yearning to have lived in that faraway and long-dead past.

"That fat guy's eyes," he said, "they're blue like they mean death. And that dim light, it's crazy."

"How would you like to have lived then?" Millie asked. "I'd want to be Cleopatra and have a pyramid built for myself. But look at those two." She nodded toward two men dancing together like lovers. "I don't like fags," she remarked, "but I like these sessions, I like to see buggy people. Do you see that one? He's a doctor."

Chico looked and saw a short dark man wearing glasses, who was almost bald. He stood out from all the rest, not so much because of his age but because of his air, as if he could not put aside the profession which distinguished him. "He's a doctor?" Chico said. "Well, he looks like one."

"He has a real habit, too," Millie said. "And he likes these sessions. But, best of all, he brings us the stuff."

"I'd like to meet him."

"He doesn't like kids."

"I'm twenty," Chico lied.

"That still wouldn't do you any good—because he likes fags."

Not that he was surprised, nothing surprised him any more—it was the manner in which she put it, in that way of hers, calm and matter-of-fact, as if she were discussing the state of the weather, a baseball score, or anything commonplace.

"Well, what can I do?" he finally replied, and they laughed. Then, out of nowhere it came back to him—the vision of an island he had never seen but which he had dreamed about while high and thought of in his fantasies.

"Suppose," he said with sudden enthusiasm, "that I went to Tahiti, would you come with me?"

"I might," said Millie, as if she considered this a mere jaunt around the corner.

"I've thought of it," he went on. "I've really thought of going there, you know. I'll have a big mansion, everything a guy could want. You wouldn't mind that, would you, living with me in a big mansion?"

"That would be wonderful. Have you really thought of going there?"

"Sure, I saw a flick about Tahiti and it's the **only** place to live. You never can tell, I might get there one of **these** days."

Abruptly then, she brought him back to earth, saying, "But after tonight I'll probably never see you again."

"You won't?"

"Well, I'm from Boston."

"Yeah?" He was not exactly taken aback or particularly disappointed, for his illusion remained intact; he merely eliminated her from it and decided to take advantage of the moment. He began by kissing her and when she yielded her lips easily he let his tongue slip into her mouth and, for a while, they tantalized each other. But the room was too smoky and the noise and the crowd bothered him. He suggested that they go into another room. Without a word, she stood up and followed him into the bedroom, but others had already sought the convenience of its dubious privacy. They entered the kitchen then and found it occupied; several couples were shooting up.

"Let's go back," he said, disgusted now. They began to wander about the house, opening doors to other rooms, and at last found an unoccupied place, a kind of large storeroom. But good enough, he thought. "Let's go in here," he said.

"Solid."

"I'll be back in a second with you know what," he said, and left her to go to the kitchen for a glass of water. When he came back, she was waiting inside the storeroom, leaning against the wall. "This will be taken care of in a little while," he said, putting the glass on a shelf above her head. Then he pressed against her, found her lips, her throat and finally his fingers undid the buttons of her blouse; he kissed her between the breasts, and found her lips again. This time she responded but when he released her she appeared almost unmoved, possessing the same odd calmness that had attracted him from the beginning. She spoke slowly, then, saying, "I didn't know you had what it takes, you look so young."

"That's what everybody tells me, baby," he said and kissed her again. This time she closed her eyes and the long black lashes upon her cheeks roused him, her soft red lips which he came back to again and again, bruising them now with the hunger of his own till at last the accumulation of desire made him speak—directly and to the point.

"For you, okay," she said.

There was a trunk in the storeroom; it was either that or the floor, and she chose the trunk, awkward as it was. When she was ready, he fell upon her, thinking this time it would be

different because she was different, but the moment sought never came, the explicit excitement and ecstasy beyond call. He sensed this first in the panting seconds between his contorted strivings when he said to himself, "What's happening to me?" and the moment he renewed each futile attack.

Finally all aspiration died, but she seemed prepared for this and made no comment till he said, "I'm dying to get high."

"For once," she retorted, "you came out with a sensible idea."

He laughed. "I'm noted for them."

But she wanted to shoot up first, and he needed it now. He didn't feel like waiting, yet it was her stuff.

"Make it fast, I'm dying," he said. She prepared to hit herself, did it quickly and filled the spoon again, loading it so that he said, "What are you trying to do, kill me?"

"Don't worry, it's not too good."

"Okay."

She cleaned the works and he sat on the trunk waiting impatiently till the stuff was cooked. Ready then, he drew up the drug too quickly and spilled some. "You dirty bastard!" he moaned, and she smiled, adding a little more to the spoon. "You're the best," he told her, and took the rest. Then he hit himself and felt gone, immediately losing the afflicting nervousness that plagued him, forgot her too—shot it in, drew it back and suddenly the power of the drug stuck. "It's real good!" he heard himself say. "I never got hit so fast." He was stoned already and grabbed her, saying, "Clean the works for me; give me a cigarette. This is the best in the world!"

"No, you clean it," she said.

"I can't, I'm stoned."

"It hit you that hard?"

He nodded and heard her laugh, watched her as she cleaned the syringe and wrapped it up. He took it from her, put it in his pocket, and grabbed and kissed her. "I don't know what I'd have done if I hadn't met you," he said.

She laughed. "But I'm not planning on getting married," she said.

"Neither am I—unless there's a witch with a million dollars, or a plantation of heroin. That way, I could be happy."

She laughed again, and he grabbed her, loving her up crazily, till she said, "Let's go in to the party."

After a moment he agreed and, as he stepped from the store-

room, he fell. "Are you all right?" she asked, helping him up.

"No, I'm dying."

The remark caused her to laugh and that made him angry, but he didn't show it, reasoning that she'd come back at him and that he'd strike her. Knowing this would happen, he held onto himself and they went back to the living room. The party was reaching toward a new height; one of the queers had the center of the floor now and was performing an erotic dance.

When the record changed, couples stood up to dance, grinding to the soft, slow music. They appeared like sleepwalkers, figures from dream landscapes in the dim, colored light, half awake, half nodding, with faces dead blank or touched with an ecstasy too painful to bear. Others were seated, shooting up, intent on their business and oblivious to everything else. Chico watched them, then looked for Icepick and saw him across the room. He turned to Millie and said, "Jesus, this is crazy!"

"Crazy and queer," she answered in that same voice, but her head was down and her eyes were almost closed.

Looking at the room again, he saw that an extraordinary change had taken place, for as he watched the dancers their faces changed; they were masks of evil now. They all appeared like devils, and something about them told him that they were. This is Hell, he thought, these aren't ordinary people. His head was spinning with the drug and he felt himself gathered in by the evil around him; then he saw that all in the room were horned and tailed, horrors who were spreading evil. Two young men and two girls in particular struck him. They were in a corner of the room talking, discussing something evil, he knew, for nothing ordinary would engage their interest. The expressions on their faces told him what he could not hear.

Finally he noticed Arthur, the one he'd met at the door. He looked different now, his eyes were slanted, his nose sharply pointed, and he wore white horns. Chico saw him then as the leader, Satan himself, master of all here, and spreading evil to everyone. He'd kill you, they all would, Chico thought. The dancers appeared inhuman; all wore horns and were enveloped in wavering arms of flame. He was afraid he would become like them just by being here. Already he felt the power of their influence, the certainty of a short, horrible life, a slow death. And the girls weren't really girls. Once, they had struck him as weak and helpless, now they seemed strong, supremely capable. He looked at Arthur again, the white horns were red

now, and he thought, He's so really weird and out of the ordinary I have to meet him.

Icepick came into the room and he and Arthur crossed to where Chico was sitting.

"Don't I know you?" Arthur said.

"No."

"Wait a minute," Icepick said. "This is Arthur."

Somehow the name seemed uncommon now and Chico was certain he was the Devil. Arthur mentioned his high, saying, "When I die this is exactly how I want to be." If he dies high, then he really is the Devil, Chico thought, for only the Devil would want to die that way. Certainly he was no common junkie, but a supernatural person whose power was a gift from Hell, and was used to change people, to make them in his own image.

Arthur was speaking again, softly, and Chico caught the drift of his words, the flight of his own mind entangled with the drug so that now the words seemed his own. "Once I get set, I'll build a mansion just for my friends to get high in, and I'll grow my own stuff; I'll have special gardeners for it, and I'll invite people every night in the week. There'll be special paintings on the walls, fire paintings with dark red flames, and women burning in the flames."

Chico heard him say this, but it was part of his own mind: he had the same desires, the same savage wish to enjoy the pain of fire.

As for Millie, he wasn't aware of her. She was sitting beside him but she belonged to some remoter world, where neither of them could ever meet again, out of reach and unwanted. Arthur was still talking, but more softly now, and Chico could no longer hear him. But it didn't matter, he seemed to know what Arthur was saying and, more and more, as he looked at him, he became convinced that this was Satan himself.

He nodded then, and the lights and music faded; the room, unmoored, drifted away on a languorous tide and then came into focus again. When he lifted his head and opened his eyes, Arthur was gone—only Icepick was there. Chico told him what he thought of Arthur, and of the things that had happened to himself, and Icepick didn't laugh. Instead, with dead seriousness, he said, "That guy is from the crypt, from the dead. Did you notice the holes in his face?"

He walked away then, and Chico looked at Millie, thinking,

She's like Arthur in some ways, just as evil. But he wanted to see her again. As if his thoughts had reached her, she lifted her head, opened her eyes. One hand found his arm and when he looked down, he noticed her long blood-red nails darkening, growing longer, and had to turn away.

Looking at Icepick across the room, he saw one of the queers approach him and ask him to dance. "Nay, let me goof first," Icepick said and, when the queer walked away, he came across the room.

"What's happening?" he said to Chico.

"Look who I met, the most beautiful and smartest girl in the world."

"I'm not the smartest but I'll do," said Millie.

Again the wallpaper caught Chico's eye. Its pattern, endlessly repeated, seemed more striking than before. All around the room the fat Roman sat above the arena laughing, enjoying the spectacle of death and his sadistic power to command life or kill. Chico was dazed and the smoke-filled room, wavering before his eyes, threatened to float away. A terrible thirst afflicted him, yet he couldn't drink. Lighting another cigarette, he said to Icepick, "Let's swing."

"Nay, I'm trying to con some stuff."

"How long will it take?"

"Not long, let me try to swing this." He walked away and Chico waited. Millie, who had gone into another room, came back, and Chico stood up and said, "I'm swinging now, baby." When she looked up, expectantly, he kissed her and turned to call Icepick.

"One minute," Icepick said.

"I'll be at the door."

"Okay, man." Icepick was talking to the one who had asked him to dance. Chico watched from the doorway and saw the queer slip his hand into his pocket, take it out again and give something to Icepick. Icepick came to the doorway and Chico asked him how he had made out. "Solid," said Icepick. Looking around once more, Chico saw Millie and threw her a kiss. She winked slowly in return and now her face appeared distorted, darker, her nose pointed. He turned and noticed the wallpaper; distortions were taking place. "Let me get out of here," he said.

"Why do you want to leave?" Icepick asked.

"I have to go. Anyway, we had a time, what more do you

want?" Chico said. He pointed to the wallpaper. "Did you bug that?"

"Real weird. Did you bug that guy I was talking to?"

"I didn't notice too much."

"Know what he said? If he had the kick he had tonight he'd kill anybody. So I says to him, 'I feel the same, but it can't be done and you know it.'"

"Hey, you see the guy with the baldy?"

"Yeah, he's a doctor."

"I know, the broad told me."

"You'd never know it but that's the facts."

"He must have much H and C. I think I'm going to be a doctor," Chico said.

Icepick laughed. "Let's go, we're blowing air, and it's late."

"What time?"

"Three-thirty."

"You're crazy. We just came in a few minutes ago."

"Come on, you're high, Chico."

They walked to the el station and Chico stopped. The long stairway appeared to be swaying dangerously and the platform above seemed far away. "I can't make that," he said. "I'm not going up. We'll take a cab. How much bread have you got?"

"A dime."

They mounted the steps then, and on the platform above Icepick put his hand in his pocket and brought it out again. "Look what my friend at the party gave me for a present," he said.

"Man, how'd you swing that much?"

"Easy, I told him I'd do him right tomorrow."

Ten long minutes later the train came into the station. Once aboard it, both of them nodded, Chico thinking of the wallpaper, the girl, her face and the way she spoke and held herself. "So cool," he said to himself, "but it didn't happen. That's the drug, but I wasn't high. That came later. Man, what's happening to me?"

As the train slid into a station, he looked up and saw that they were downtown and had long since passed their own station. Turning to Icepick, he shook him.

"What's wrong?"

"We're getting off," said Chico. On the platform he wanted to know why Icepick hadn't called him.

"I was goofing," Icepick answered.

They looked at each other and the empty platform and suddenly both laughed.

chapter 35

CHICO stood before the door of his house stricken with fear. He was almost down from his high. He wanted it to linger but it was leaving him quickly. He thought of his brother. What would Paulie do if he knew what had occurred tonight? The thought of what might happen almost made him walk away, but he only looked up at the windows. All were darkened, the whole house quiet, sleeping. Relieved, he went in, climbed the stairs and, removing his shoes, opened the door slowly and crept through the house to his own room. He listened. Nothing but his own labored breathing. He undressed and sank down on the bed. Sleep came, winding around him, sleep and darkness like great silken folds of some soft and precious fabric.

Morning, and his brother stood over him, shaking him, but he pretended he was sleeping yet, sensing trouble. Footsteps, and he knew Paulie had left the room, but he returned quietly to pour a glass of water in his face.

"What the hell are you doing?" Chico said, sitting up.

"Don't yell," said Paulie, "if you know what's good for you. Now—where were you last night?"

"I went to a show. Why?"

In answer, Paulie suddenly grabbed his arm to examine it for needle marks. "Go ahead, tell me you were at a show again," he said. "I like the way you lie."

"I'm not lying, Paulie. I went to a late show. You've got to believe that."

"Yeah, yeah, I've got to, only I ain't, you lying son-of-a-bitch. I wouldn't take your word if you were dying. I'm going to have you sent away."

"But I'm not lying, I can prove where I was."

"Prove hell! I'll see you tonight, I haven't got time to waste on you right now." Paulie left the room then, doors

slammed behind him, quick footsteps sounded on the stairs, faded, and once more the quietness of the hour crept back.

Chico dressed quickly and left the house in purposeless flight, upset by Paulie's warning. But there was no place to escape to. At the corner he realized this, but he didn't go back. Instead, he walked to Icepick's house and knocked until he got him out of bed and he came to the door.

"Man, what are you trying to do?" Icepick asked when he saw who it was.

"I know, I'm tired too. I need sleep."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Paulie was on my tail again. He knows."

Icepick yawned. It was none of his concern and he wanted to sleep. "Well, I'm hitting the pillow," he said.

"But, man, I'm really beat. Let me stay and shoot up. You've got stuff."

Icepick considered a moment, then allowed him five caps and went off to bed again. Chico shot up immediately, but there was no real kick to the drug. Still, it got him a "head" and made him feel better. But he needed sleep; it was all he could do to keep his eyes open now and there was no sense to it. He needed sleep—to go home, though, would be foolish. "Foolish, foolish," he told himself, and lay back upon the couch and closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, Icepick was standing over him, fully dressed. He'd been out of the house for hours, returning to waken Chico. The day was almost gone but Chico didn't know this, feeling he had hardly slept. Even when Icepick said, "Hurry up, the old lady'll be coming home," he didn't believe him. "Nay, let me sleep," he answered.

"You slept long enough"

Chico sat up now.

"We've got to quit it, it's getting late."

"Okay." Chico lit a cigarette, remembering the evening before, the unreal sequence of events that now seemed like a nightmare. And remembered Milly—but already he couldn't recall her face—only her voice, the calm unhurried manner which had so intrigued him.

They went down to the candy store on the corner, but it was getting late and Chico kept thinking of his brother. An accounting was due and it would be foolish to avoid it. "I

better quit it for home," he said to Icepick. "Maybe I'll see you later."

Still feeling tired, he went directly home, turned the radio on, and waited. Paulie returned early.

"So you're here?" Paulie said.

"Yeah, where did you think I'd be?"

"That's not the idea. Where were you all afternoon?"

"Here most of the time."

"What about last night?"

"Are we going to go into that again? I told you already where I was."

Paulie stared at him angrily, then his face lost expression and he turned away. A moment later he walked out of the house.

For some moments everything was quiet. Then, faintly, as if from far away, music started up, the familiar rhythms of the "Cuban Mamba." It came from below in the house, he'd heard it over and over again but now there was a new note in it, something he tried to catch and failed. It touched him, though, deep inside, penetrating like a long thin knife, producing a kind of pain. Finally it drove him from the house. Passing along the first landing, he heard the last of the music as the record ended. He stopped before the door where the music had come from. There had been other times when he wanted to stop, wanted to know who was the one who always played that same record. The bitch must always be high, he thought, and started down the last flight. At the door below, as he grasped the knob, he heard the record go on again and rushed from the building.

On the street he met Icepick. "Let's go to a flick," said Chico.

"Got the bread?"

"A lonely buck."

"Solid, but what's playing?"

"A weird picture. The 'Pagan Love Song.' I've got to see that while I'm high. I want to see that island."

"Yeah!"

"How much stuff have you got left?"

"About fifteen pieces."

"Crazy! Let's see that picture."

Upstairs in the movie house they sat back in their seats. They'd done themselves up in the Gents' Room and the drug

was in their blood and brains now. But the feature picture wasn't on. "It doesn't matter. I'll nod through this one and ball the other," Chico told himself and nodded off, to wake again when Icepick shook him. He sat forward to bug the picture—and again lost himself in fantasy.

chapter 36

RAIN washed the city and scented the air, dispersing the crowds that usually filled the summer streets. There was no one about as they stood under the glittering marquee. The streets were desolate, abnormally dark, though here and there splinters of light lay jagged and alive across the faces of spreading puddles. Enormous puddles, spreading and spreading, and the rain sound muffled against brick and glass, the puddles darkening now, deepening, ready to engulf the world, ready to obliterate the lurid marquee and the two figures that stood below it. Fear made Chico stir; he was not asleep but on the edge.

And now he remembered coming out of the movie house, remembered the rain, the empty streets, and Icepick and himself standing under the marquee; the walk home, the stairs, and the routine when he faced his brother. The same old question: Where were you? Well, he'd been at the show. Most times that was the answer, for he had to dodge. But there was no way of getting around Paulie. Paulie knew that he was still getting high but he didn't realize how high, and it wouldn't pay to have him find out. He didn't want to hurt Paulie, nor his mother, but he was hurting himself. Only there was no way out now.

No way but sleep, and he tried to sleep, to dream of that island in the Pacific, of beautiful girls, riches, power, yet he knew this would never be real, he could only dream of it. "But if I can make it, I will," he told himself. "I'm going to try, even if I don't live long. Maybe, it will end quick, take years away from my life—but I don't care, as long as I've got what I want." Yet things weren't going too well, with Paulie watching all the time and his habit making ever-increasing

demands. Not that he blamed the drug, for having a habit didn't seem harmful. But the things he had to do puzzled him, and he asked himself: "Why do I have to do what I do? Why haven't I got a million dollars?"

He found no answers, and the questions were depressing. He tried to sleep again and failed. His mind wandered through the wasted summer and back to spring, recovering an experience he had buried deeply—a midnight trek to a church service. The two girls were as high as he and Icepick when they suggested the idea. At first he refused, but Icepick said, "Man, it'll be crazy, those weird lights and weird windows."

"And God on the cross dripping blood," Chico had said to himself. He repeated the words now, breeching the gap in time. That way he could bring back and so relive a night his mind had chosen to store away. Outside, rain flailed the window, then whispered softly. He was staring at the ceiling now, at the same time walking a dark street with Icepick and two girls. No one spoke and, as they entered the church, he was still smoking a cigarette. A gruff voice reminded him to douse it and he did. As soon as he passed from vestibule to interior, he was struck by the high curved walls and the dim light which at first obscured the many women in black who knelt with bowed and kerchiefed heads. When at last he noticed them, it seemed that they were crying to Heaven and in fear of Hell.

A small, dark person was standing at the side of the altar in the shadows which the flickering light of the candles failed to reach. This was Satan, but only Chico noticed. He was smiling at those who had come to worship, because they were his people instead of the Lord's and were going with him. Chico looked around then and saw many sinners who had no reason to go to church. But the Devil knew and kept smiling. Christ on a huge cross just beside the altar caught his eyes now, nails in His hands and feet, head hanging and blood dripping from the spear wound in His side. "Nothing was ever worth that," he told himself, "but if I knew I was coming back from the dead, I'd bust open every bank and get high for the rest of my supernatural life." No thought of religion entered his mind, none ever did any more. There was only evil, and evil friends like Icepick and the two girls who were goofing off beside him. The one next to him sat with her eyes closed and she appeared to be sorry for her sins,

but she belonged to the one in the shadow by the altar and knew it too.

Turning now, he saw the priest and three altar boys coming down the aisle, the altar boys bearing long candles, heads bowed, the priest sprinkling holy water—but Chico and the Devil laughed. When the priest mounted the altar, the Devil leaned upon his shoulder, then with another leap, landed in the center aisle. Walking toward the back of the church, he patted those he could reach, saying, "You're mine, you're mine!" Chico had to turn to follow him.

The choir was singing, and the Devil was up there, singing too, not Latin, but evil, and his words were part of everyone's mind. He then appeared in front of the big crucifix beside the altar, as if he were saying, "What do you think of your people? They're mine, mine, do you hear?" And, as one all good, God made no answer. With that, statue and Devil began to waver and fade—and Lorrie, the girl beside Chico, whispered, "Ain't it weird in here with all those windows?"

He nodded and wanted to leave, but suddenly it occurred to him why everyone had come to Mass. They were here because they wanted something, because they knew they were going to Hell. Now the gold crucifix on the altar itself attracted his eye and he wanted to take it and sell it to buy drugs. The windows, arched, strange, drew his eyes again. Like the high nave with painted clouds and flying angels, they belonged to a vanished age. Meanwhile the Mass continued; people were praying, the priest chanted in Latin—and finally it ended, the priest leaving the altar, the people standing up and filing slowly out of the church. At the inner door, Lorrie stopped and splashed holy water in Chico's face. He swore at her softly and she wanted to know why he was angry. "Nothing, forget it," he said. When they were outside he mentioned what he had seen. To his surprise, Lorrie said she had seen evil in the people and couldn't understand why they went to church.

"Then why did you go," he asked.

"Don't be so funny," she answered.

"I'm not, I'm just talking facts, that's all." With that he put his arm around her and walked her home.

Here the reborn episode ended, and he was still staring at the ceiling. The sound of the rain had long since ceased,

there was no sound of any kind, there was nothing now and he closed his eyes. When he awoke it was late in the morning.

Angel was at the door. Chico hesitated when he knew who it was, then let him in. They looked at each other like strangers—but neither mentioned that anything had been amiss between them. There was merely a feeling of awkwardness. Angel said, "Have you got anything?"

"I'm down and busted," Chico answered.

"I'm really beat. You got any ideas how to get something?"

"Nothing to talk about," said Chico. For the first time he noted the change in Angel. He was much thinner and didn't look quite like the same person. Actually, Chico was seeing a reflection of himself, for the toll of the drug was telling on him too. He'd lost weight, and there was the beginning of the humped back, indicative of the addict. But of the two, Angel was in poorer condition. However, they didn't remark about themselves. Money was their problem, and now Angel suggested a way of getting it—a dangerous method. They'd pose as pushers, take the money of other addicts and give nothing in return or, if necessary, sell them "lemons." At first Chico was against the idea, but Angel finally won him over.

Dressed fairly well, they haunted certain known areas, waiting till someone would drift up and ask for the drug. They could tell a junkie on sight but were wary of anyone who was over twenty-one. That way they avoided the Law. Their methods were uncomplicated and most of the time, because of the addicts' desperation, successful. When a junkie approached and asked for the stuff there was always the same answer: "Well, I ain't got it on me now, but I can go get it for you." A demand for money would be made with an expectation of refusal. But that was taken care of. Chico would volunteer to wait with the customer while Angel went off with the money. Then, on pretext of seeing why Angel was delayed, Chico would also leave and disappear. When the customer didn't fall for this method, they resorted to selling "lemons," the drug so heavily mixed with milk sugar that it carried no kick. Sometimes they sold milk sugar alone, depending on the customer.

But this was precarious business and they had to keep on the move, for those who were cheated came looking for them.

One day they were approached by three strangers who wanted to buy marihuana, enough to make the proposition irresistible. But the buyers were wary, they didn't want to pay up.

"Look, you know us, we're all right kitties, so you got to give." Angel spoke with such an air of innocence that he won his point. "Besides," he added, "we don't deal in pot, we got to get it for you and nobody's giving it to us for nothing."

The money was passed over then and, to make it look good, Chico remained with the two customers. After a reasonable time, when the two with him began to get restless, he suggested checking on Angel's delay. The customers, however, decided to accompany him. There was only one thing to do—go to a pusher and act out a scene. A reasonable idea, but Chico was on edge when they came to the house and started up the stairs. He began to sweat. Suppose Roman isn't home? he thought. He could barely make the stairs and lift his hand to knock at Roman's door. Then he prayed, and was answered. No face had ever seemed so welcome before. He asked for Angel, and was told that he hadn't been there.

Chico pretended shock. The two customers were angry and, knowing what had happened, they turned on Chico.

"That guy swung you," he said, wide-eyed. "Damn anybody that does that is worth a stomping!"

"Yeah, and you're his boy. You're with him so we can start by stomping you."

"Me?" said Chico innocently. "Hell, he swung me too. I just want to lay hands on him."

The elder of the customers, a dangerous and capable-looking character, gazed doubtfully at Chico but finally said, "Where does he live? I want to know."

"I don't know—but I can tell you where he hangs out."

"Well, let's move. I'm going to beat that cat dead when I reach him."

"Sure, but you won't find him there now," Chico said. "I'll tell you what, I'll meet you later and we'll look for him."

"Okay, solid."

After they parted, Chico met Angel at the appointed place and they laughed over what had happened. But this was the last, Chico wanted that known.

"Okay by me," Angel said. "Now let's get some stuff."

Angel hailed a cab and they went back to Roman's house

and bought from him, then taxied back to their own neighborhood. As they stepped from the cab, the two customers they had cheated turned the corner accompanied by three friends. They were looking for trouble, and Chico and Angel knew it.

Both of them ran then, Angel making for a cellar, Chico streaking into a hallway. He ran up the stairs, to the roof landing. The door was locked. Trapped, he waited. Fifteen minutes passed; no one had come up the stairs. Probably they'd all gone after Angel, he reasoned, and went down the stairs. From the vestibule the street seemed clear, but as soon as he stepped outside the five who were hunting him came running at him. There was no sense in trying to escape now. Chico stood there and waited. The leader came up to him. "All right," he said, "better tell us where your pal went."

"I don't know," Chico said. Just then he saw Angel come up out of the cellar where he'd been hiding. One of the men saw him, too, and let out a yell. Instead of going back to his retreat, Angel dashed across the street and ran into a vestibule.

No one bothered to chase him this time. Instead, the leader of the five flashed a knife and put it to Chico's belly, saying, "You better go get your friend and our money, unless you don't want to live."

There was no sense in protesting. The knife-man wasn't looking for excuses, so Chico said, "I'll go get it." He walked to the house where Icepick lived, knowing that Angel was up there. As soon as he entered Icepick's apartment, he said, "They're down there waiting for their money. They put a knife in my guts."

"Yeah, well, let them wait. We'll stay here and get high. They can't reach us," Angel answered.

The three of them shot up then and sat around smoking. A while later footsteps sounded on the stairs, on the landing. Then a knock on the door. But they were prepared for that, and Icepick answered the door.

"Hello, who are you?" he asked, seeing two of the five who'd been chasing Angel and Chico.

"Is Benny here?"

It was the name Angel used in his dealings. Icepick said, "I don't know no Benny," and slammed the door in their faces.

They watched from a front window and saw the five gather

below in the street. "Let them wait," Angel said, but after an hour, when he saw the five were still on the corner, he grew restless and wanted Icepick's gun. "I'll walk down on them and start blasting. I'll scatter their brains in the street," he bragged. He was crazy high now, but Icepick refused to lend his gun.

"You'll get busted down yourself. Anyhow," he advised, "there ain't no percentage in doing that when you can sit it out quiet."

So they waited again, and within another hour the five on the corner walked away.

Three days later there was a sequel for Chico. He was walking toward Angel's house when he saw one of the five who had been after him. About to run, he stopped himself and walked into a hallway. Seconds later, the door opened and his pursuer stood before him.

"All right, where's the money?" he said. "I'm giving you a chance."

"Here," said Chico, and putting his hand in his pocket, he drew out his keys. A quick movement and he caught his persecutor over the eye. Blood gushed. He hit him again and knocked him down. Then worked on his eye and finally kicked him in the face and walked out, saying, "That goes for any of the rest that comes around."

But he was beat and shaken because he wasn't high. He was gasping when he came from the vestibule and, needing the stuff more than ever now, he hurried away to get it.

chapter 37

IT BEGAN that night, the intense nervousness and fear of getting caught. It had always been with him but now it was three-fold, a fear of the police, of his brother, and of any one of the addicts he'd swindled. He was suspicious of everyone, and had no way of knowing who was following him in the street and who was merely an idling stroller.

Returning home late one night, he turned a corner when he

heard footsteps behind him. And suddenly the quietness of the street and the sound of the steps took on significance. He was being followed by someone, and not bothering to see who it was, he bolted for home. Not till he was gasping on the third flight, unable to go on, did it occur to him that the footsteps behind had ceased as soon as he began to run. But someone had been following, he told himself, yet deep inside he was troubled by a doubt, not daring to admit that no one had been shadowing him. He rolled ceaselessly in bed, still frightened, and unable to stem his thoughts. Then broke into a cold sweat when he realized that even here he was not safe. For the police might come and drag him out of bed, or, more likely, a junkie who'd lost money to him could slip down the fire escape and through the window.

Hot as the night was, he closed and locked the window, pulled the shade all the way and waited for footsteps to descend the iron flight from the roof. He fell asleep without knowing it. The light was still burning, the ash tray beside his bed crowded with butts, and one, burning out, sent up a blue-white wavering streamer of smoke into the dead, motionless air.

With the light of the sun there was some release, but when night fell again, fear returned. Even as the first shadows of dusk moved out of the east and filtered through the streets the uneasiness started, and increased with the deepening night. Walking the street was difficult now, for where there were people the enemy lurked, but even when the streets were empty the feeling still persisted.

He changed his habits, lay abed longer, or stayed with Angel and ranged the streets less. When necessity forced him out he chose new paths, switched his routes. Sometimes he took a longer way home, other times he went directly. Entering his own house, he never went in by way of the front door but, instead, chose the next house and climbed to the roof, crossed it and came down by way of his own roof.

Nothing happened, no one caught him, yet he didn't relax. It was always his alertness that prevented an incident, but his fear remained, his thoughts were the same—the Law was watching, his brother, and his enemies. Wherever he went he heard steps, saw shadows. If someone happened to walk behind him, he immediately tensed. "It's nothing at all," he told him-

self. Yet there was always the same soft unhurried tread behind him wherever he went.

One night on the way to Angel's house he turned a corner into an empty street. No sooner had he gone past the sharp angle of the building than the footsteps sounded. Dum! Dum! Dum! they thudded behind, startling him. He began to walk faster, but the footsteps behind kept accurate pace with his own, sounding louder, quicker, as if whoever was following was closing in. He fought himself, saying it was only his imagination, but at the next corner, he broke into a run, ran half-way down the block and dodged into a doorway. There he waited, with his heart pounding faster by the moment; he could feel and hear it, and his mouth was burning with thirst, his lungs dried out. When no one passed immediately, his anxiety increased and he had to smoke. He lit up and sucked at the cigarette as he watched through the glass.

As the minutes dragged by, he worried, afraid someone would come, and finally afraid because no one did. Ten minutes, or was it ten hours? There was no way of knowing, but he couldn't stand it any longer, no matter who was waiting out there. He left the hallway then and walked out, faster, faster, until he was almost running again as he reached the candy store. There he bought a soft drink but watched the window. Finally he left and walked to Angel's house.

Once inside the hall he relaxed, only to tense immediately when he heard someone in the dimness above. He stopped with his hand gripping the bannister and looked up, eyes bulging, head throbbing. When no one appeared and nothing happened, he continued his interrupted flight and did not relax till the door of Angel's room closed behind him.

Angel began to dress. He hadn't noticed anything wrong—how heavily Chico was breathing.

"Getting high tonight?" he asked.

"What do you think?"

"If we do, it won't be here. My mother's starting to bear down."

"Where do we hit up then?"

"At Icepick's. I'll meet you there later. Right now I've got a little business."

Chico was terrified. The feeling that came to him was always worse on Icepick's block. He felt someone would be waiting there to kill him tonight.

No sooner had he left Angel's house than he became aware of a follower. This time there was no mistake about it, this was no phantom. Turning a corner, he recognized his brother and knew what was up. He's tailing me to see where I go. I've got to lose him, Chico thought. He ducked into a doorway, ran up the stairs, walked across the rooftops to the end of the block and came down again. There was no sign of Paulie—he had lost him.

They were still high when they came down from Icepick's house. Chico had forgotten about his brother until Angel happened to discover Paulie following them. Again, Chico had to throw him off. He climbed to another roof and lay down and waited, then nodded off.

Two hours later, he was home. To create an impression, he asked his mother the time, and told her he was tired and was going to sleep early.

It was ten o'clock then. At eleven-thirty his brother walked into his room and woke him.

"Why did you go in that house?" The question came at him like a shot.

"What house?" Chico said.

"You went to get high."

"Like hell I did!"

"Then why did you duck me?"

"Because I don't like anyone following me. Would you like it?"

"Shut up and let me see your arm!" Paulie grabbed his arm and lifted it. "They're fresh marks," he said. "Do you want to wreck the family? Your own life?"

"They're old marks," Chico lied. Seeing that Paulie didn't believe him, he got up and began to dress.

Paulie watched him and, when Chico started to leave, he said, "If you go, you better not come back."

Chico walked out of the house and bought a pack of cigarettes. Fifteen minutes later he was back again. Paulie followed him to his room. There, with the door closed, he said, "So you're back."

"Yeah, I'm back."•

"How come? Is it because you know you got a good thing? You're no good, you're a junkie."

"I'm not using it, let me alone," Chico finally said.

"Don't give me that. You're nothing but a horsehead. If you weren't using it, you wouldn't look like you do. You wouldn't be out all the time. But you'd rather be with your junkie friends." Paulie stopped speaking and glared at him, then turned and left the room, slamming the door after him.

Chico waited, expecting his mother to come running in, but nothing happened and finally he sat down on the bed. As he started to undress he felt an odd burning sensation in his left arm but this had happened before and he paid no attention to it, finishing undressing and getting into bed.

An hour later, with his arm burning more, he got up again and put on the light. His arm was swollen now and an old fear, always close to the surface of consciousness, erupted. That was bad stuff I had tonight, he thought. It was cut with something bad—look at this. He recalled Paulie's words then and wondered if this was the beginning. Would he die? But there was no one to go to now, no one to help him. He stared at his arm again, felt it pulsing, firing burning in it.

"The hell with it," he said, "nothing's wrong." He got up and went to the bathroom and rubbed his arm with alcohol.

chapter 38

NEXT MORNING the swelling had gone down and his arm seemed normal again, but when he examined it closely where he'd hit himself with the needle, the skin was purple and fell away when he touched it. It's just a little infection, he thought. Nothing to worry about.

That evening he stood on the corner with Angel. "I'm out, the old lady kicked me out," Angel was saying. "So we can't shoot up in the room any more."

"Man, where're you going to sleep?"

"In the cellar till she takes me back."

"Think she will?"

"She did before. She's just sore cause I pawned something on her again."

"Man, you're really down."

"We both are."

"How do you mean?"

"The stuff's got us, that's all. We ought to kick it, but we can't."

Chico had no answer. Too many times before he'd heard the same comment and refuted it. This time it was different, this time Angel was right. They were both junkies, both gone, but that hardly seemed to matter now. For there was only one thing—*junk*—nothing else. It was not merely a habit, but life itself, an end in itself, something to live for and look forward to. Everything revolved around it, the day's routine, thoughts, dreams, ideas, plans; it was the center of all things, driving force and anodyne, the determining power which gave direction to his life. And every second of the day belonged to it, every minute was now divided between the pleasure of indulging and the pain of trying to feed the gnawing demands that forever increased. Even the fears and dangers involved did not matter, in some ways they even enhanced the value of the drug. There were, in short, only three states—for you were either high, down, or hunting for the dollar to get high again.

Now both he and Angel had but a single problem—where to shoot up. Angel's cellar was out, and Icepick was not around. Chico suggested a roof landing as the next safest place, and for luck, they selected a new landing.

Everything was going well, but in the dim-lit hall Chico's fear of getting caught returned and by the time he reached the landing he was trembling. Angel lit a candle and the effect startled Chico. They drew together in the semidarkness, their shadows against the dirty wall, the skylight overhead like an all-observing eye, the yellow candle-flame bending to a mysterious flow of air. Remote sounds spiraled up through the stairwell from the depths of the house.

Angel went first, while Chico watched the stairs, the shadows creating illusory shapes that drew beads of sweat to his brow. When his turn came, he was shaking so badly that he couldn't hit himself properly. Glancing at Angel now, he saw him calm, stoned, and wanted to be the same. Angel's dark eyes gleamed and watered, his hand was on his nose. Chico turned away and, again failing to hit himself, began to shake all over.

"Here," he said, "hold that goddamn candle closer!"

Dazed, Angel lifted the candle higher, and hot wax dripping from it fell on Chico's arm.

"You idiot, what are you trying to do!" Chico peeled the wax from his skin. "Just hold it close, that's all." His nerves by now were shattered, and with blood in the needle he was afraid it would clog. Still, he wanted to try the other arm for a hit. "Loosen the belt," he said, and Angel followed the command, and applied the leather to Chico's other arm.

It happened then. The needle went home and as soon as Chico shot the stuff in he felt it, and almost instantly was high. He began to think in fantastic terms of this scene, staring at the dirty glass of the skylight overhead, then at the filthy stairs, and presently the forgotten sounds of the house came back: a Spanish record, and an inarticulate murmur which swelled within his head, till all the mingled conversations of the house became inextricably tangled and confused, forming at last a rhythmic *yah! yah!* that rose to a screaming sharpness.

Once more Chico looked down the stairs, and said, "Suppose the Law comes, what do we do? We'd get busted fast."

"Bull-crap!" Angel answered

And just then Chico noticed a man on the landing below. With senses heightened but distorted, he saw immediately how fat the man was, his oily hair, his greasy face—and he even believed he smelled garlic on his breath. "Maybe he'll come up here," he told himself. Then he blew out the candle, stood by the roof door and warned Angel, though Angel needed no warning. There were footsteps on the last flight now. The man was coming up. He called out, but his voice was cut off by the door as Angel slammed it behind him.

"Throw the outside latch!" Chico said, and they ran for another door two rooftops away. Even before they reached it, Chico heard a bang and knew the fat man had kicked the door they had locked behind them. A moment later he reached the second roof door, grabbed the knob and turned it, but the door stood fast. "Christ, it's locked!" he cried in desperation, and heard a hammering behind him, a furious attack on wood. He was even aware of the drug in his blood, and the moonlight on the roof, the works he'd left behind and the *yah! yah!* that had spun up through the stairwell. He ran for the next roof door, found it locked, swung away and made for the next with his heart pounding at his ribs.

The fourth door was locked, too, but he didn't go on. Angel stopped him, whipped his knife out and probed the crack between door and frame with the blade. "Jesus, hurry!" Chico pleaded, still hearing the hammering blows behind him. Angel found the latch with his knife, flipped it up, and tore the door open. They were inside.

"Thank God! Thank God!" Chico said, and they started down the stairs

"Wait, take it easy," Angel warned, raising his hand.

They paused, and Chico said, "Suppose someone's coming up?" But, listening, they heard no one on the stairs.

"We got to split up, separate," Angel advised. "I'll go first." He started down the stairs then, leaving Chico to follow at a reasonable distance.

While he waited, Chico caught a terrible odor like a mixture of rotten eggs and raw beans and it mixed in his head with the endless chatter of Spanish. Hating the sound, he clung to the bannister, and started down again when his hand glided over a glob of spit. Revolted, he snatched his hand up quickly and moved downward faster with the terrible odor thickening around him till he reached the bottom floor. There a new smell assailed him and as he entered the yard his mind was a litter of garbage, the droppings of rats and mice, the odor of garlic. Dark walls of buildings reared up; in contrast, the windows were startlingly bright. For a moment he stopped, then ran for the cellar door, sweating, stoned. the garlic smell and faraway banging still churning in his mind.

As he burst free of the dark cellar he saw Angel walking slowly down the street on the opposite sidewalk and followed him to the corner. Angel was waiting for him.

"That was a close one," Chico said.

"Yeah, and you lost the works."

"Well, we're lucky we didn't get busted. Hey, did you see that guy on the stairs? Wasn't he a fermented fat pig? He shone like a black olive in oil. And them beat, raggy clothes. He looked like he was wobbling up the stairs. Wasn't that weird?"

"Yeah, yeah, let's cut out of here quick. Let's go downtown to Times Square."

"It's late."

"So what?"

"Okay, solid man. Solid," said Chico, but he shivered when the soft night-wind from the river touched his sweating body.

chapter 39

CHICO was home, and the evening had faded to a distant memory. A queer feeling was inside him which he sensed was not from the drug. He felt an oddness about his head, a persistent sensation which almost convinced him that something had inflated it. Certainly it felt swollen and stretched. A dull accompanying pain and lightness made him uneasy but, more disturbing, was the feeling that he had lost control of his body and could not balance himself. Objects had a hazy, unfamiliar look, as if they would teeter without provocation. When he allowed his head to go out of line with his body he felt he would topple over.

During the evening, he had almost fallen several times. Periods of chill and fever afflicted him, too, and he recalled that moment on the corner when the wind, touching his sweating body, had set him trembling. Could something have entered him then, he thought, something evil?

He looked at himself in the mirror and the glass seemed shadowed; someone else was standing there, certainly not himself. Leaning forward, he saw something move, the room was beginning to spin faster and faster and a force drew him toward the mirror as if to suck him into the whirlpool reflected there. He caught himself, hands grasping each end of the bureau, and turned around. The room stood perfectly still, nothing appeared disturbed. "It's only me," he said aloud, and let himself down on the bed.

All day he had not bothered with his arm. He didn't want to look at it but now he remembered and rolled up his sleeve. Where the purple patch had been there was a new mark, like a tiny bruise. That was all. No accompanying pain, no irritation, no swelling. He unrolled his sleeve, feeling hot and cold at the same moment. The chill persisted; it was in his bones now and he had to shut the window. He began to shake all over and undressed quickly. In bed he closed his eyes and heard a

vague, faraway voice say, "You're going to be sick. You are sick but you don't know it. You're going to be sick."

In the morning he glanced at his arm and noticed the mark. It was slightly larger, darker, that was all. "Nothing to worry about," he told himself. "It'll go away." His running nose, the general feeling of weakness and an unnatural heat in his body, a tenderness that afflicted his skin—these were of more concern.

He got up and drank almost a quart of water, then went back to bed and lay there, giving himself to a kind of twilight sleep through the long muted day. In the late afternoon he rose and left the house. But he was not himself, his legs wouldn't carry him and he had no inclination to seek company. No desire for anything but the drug.

He went home again; his family had not yet arrived and he shot up. As the high came on, his whole body responded to a twinkling sensation of pins and needles. He felt giddy, then chilled, and went to the bathroom where he dosed himself with aspirins. By the time he got into bed the fever that had been slumbering within him all day was a raging fire. He knew he was sick now and was worried because he had shot up. "I shouldn't have got high," he told himself. "That's what threw me. It brought the fever back."

The fever flamed in his brain now, it was consuming his body. Only the cool liquid hands of water could save him. In a state halfway between dream and reality, he remembered a summer afternoon at the beach. How long ago the first heat-stricken days of July seemed now. His body's insatiate desire to calm the fire within it awakened the past and brought him suddenly back to that beach where he had gone. It was as if he were there, enjoying the sensation of a new kick—being high and swimming under water in an implausible world, eyes wide open and seeing the rocks not as rocks but as a city, a trembling marine kingdom and yet his own home, a mansion in disguise with countless rooms. A world of terror, too, for the thought struck him that his own world was covered by water and no human existed any more. He swam downward with two girls and saw them as fish, and feared drowning, the sudden attack of a shark. Needing the presence of rocks, he closed his eyes in fear and his head swelled; bubbles pearded from his mouth and in the dim marine light he saw the girls' bodies without arms or legs and felt frightened, helpless to

save them. He noticed white barnacles like doors on the rocks, moss like the grass of the land; he wanted to walk on it but he was afraid; and the girls were drowning and he couldn't save them. Moving slowly, theirs was a pantomime of drowning, and their ugly, formless bodies he saw were their real selves and he rejected them now, for they were good only to be his slaves, to be sold or destroyed at will.

Under water and yet not under, it seemed to him that he was floating in the sky, going to a new destination. He was drifting upward, cast off in outer space—the greatest kick of all; but once on the beach again it was gone. Something happened in the water that destroyed the effect of the drug. He came wading in, returned to a world of brilliant sunlight, a glittering shelf of sand, and gazed at a group of Sunday acrobats, rippling-muscle and tanned, who now formed a frozen tableau, a pyramid of straining, sinewed bodies encircled by a group of half-naked admiring girls. "Show-offs! Idiots!" he said, and the acrobats fell, the naked giants tumbled, the pyramid dividing, shattering in a glittering silent crash. Then the waters receded, the sandy beach disappeared.

He was back in the room, staring at the ceiling and burning with fire. Someone was standing in the room now, watching him. Who was it? He was afraid to ask, afraid to stir, closing his eyes, retreating into a dark cave to safety. But even there the apparitional figure reached for him and a hand touched his burning skin, a hand like ice. "Don't! Don't touch me!" he shouted, but in the dark cave deep in the earth his dry lips shaped only an unheard whisper—and when he opened his eyes again the phantom figure was gone.

Perhaps the raging fire of his fever did it, turning back the days like the pages of a book to exhume the past. He was staring at the ceiling again, and it was winter now. He was in a movie and was high on horse when the idea came to him—to go to the museum. He had spent many hours that winter roaming its dim halls. Like his previous visits, this, too, was unpremeditated, reasonless. Something drove him to the galleries. Before, there were only the fascinating paintings which somehow came to life, were real for him, demons of the Inferno on sweeping canvases with black barren landscapes or amidst leaping flames, anguished victims, tormented innocents whose blood dripped in ancient sacrificial rites painted by artists long since dead—scenes of the past, myths of the race.

To have lived then, he thought, to participate in such rites! But to come back each time to examine the paintings and see them come to life was, in a sense, a return to the past, a joining and communication almost sufficient to satisfy him. But his last visit was overwhelming.

Now he remembered the stairway and walking up it; it was growing dark, snowing outside. His footsteps echoed; there was no one near, only the mute formal statuary that once graced a glorious civilization the Nile had spawned and then watched die. Nearing a lower landing, he stopped and, through the props of the railing above his head, saw a mounted knight in armor, lance pointed directly at him. Stunned, he couldn't move, for the knight seemed alive, threatening him. Finally he stirred and reaching the landing, walked slowly to the door of the Armor Room and paused. It was dark in there, no one present but those who truly belonged, the armored ones with all the accoutrements of war. As he moved into the room, a new feeling possessed him and he was at once back in the past, close to Christ and Hell, he thought.

The mounted Teutonic knight still held him, for the horse seemed ready to charge, the lance still threatened. Eyes beyond the slitted mask gleamed. The room was filled with armored figures, mounted and standing, and as he turned to them, he found all of them watching him. His gaze returned to the first knight and he moved closer, to find beyond the slits of the mask a pair of eyes that met his own. Frightened, he didn't want to move, torn between the wish to run, and the wish to experience this new sensation, for it seemed real and he was back in another time: he was the one the mounted knight intended to kill.

A sound deflected his interest, a faint echo from the world outside, and he turned to see the arms of another knight reaching for him. The illusion was so real that he started for the door—then came back to stare at those eyes behind the slitted mask of the mounted knight. From where he now stood the mask appeared all shadowed but for a single gleaming streak where the dying light from a high window reached out to touch it. All dark, yet beyond the slits two eyes fixed him with a brighter stare, and the deadly lance threatened his belly; even the horse seemed alive, and Chico's heart began to pound. He backed away and, turning at the door, ran for the stairs.

Now he turned over in bed, to face the window. It was dark, the night was there. He turned away again, wondering about the museum. Why had he gone there? For weeks during the winter he'd returned again and again while high to seek the lurid sensations of the galleries; he had sought something, touched something only to lose it.

"What was it?" he asked, and finding no answer, dreamed of walking through the solar system when suddenly a giant flame picked him up and began twirling him. At the same moment a bombardment of meteors came at him, rocket ships with pointed tips zoomed by and the giant flame kept spinning and spinning, then began to slow. If it stopped, that meant death. "No, God! I don't want to die!" he screamed, and the flame stopped.

I'm dead, he thought, and woke, delirious. He didn't recognize the room and slipped back into sleep. Immediately he heard a gong resounding, a huge brass gong that quivered to each blow. The noise rocked in his head, and now there were countless red threads crawling on his body like worms and ants, walking all over him, devouring him alive, he thought, so that his heart began to pound. Afraid that it would stop, he cried out, "No, no, don't stop!" and the scene changed.

Now he was in a dark cellar. Water was dripping from huge scaly pipes festooned with enormous spiderwebs. It dripped, dripped, dripped on his head—and then the witch appeared. With long black hair to the knees, black-robed, wrinkled of face and with a pointed nose, she walked toward him as the water dripped and the gong started up again with the sound that meant death. The witch stood over him now, evil, sweating, and he saw fire spinning; then it was a man in white, and he heard him say, "He has nothing but measles." "No, don't take me to the hospital! Don't take me!" Chico shouted in the dream, and the witch, leaning over him, began to strike him with a bat.

He awoke and saw his mother looking down at him. "What are you doing?" he said.

"Rubbing you with alcohol," she answered.

He tried to smile. He was safe, he thought, and closed his eyes; immediately the witch appeared, but then again it was the man in white who wanted to take him away, and he held

on tightly to the bed so he wouldn't be taken, his heart pounding, coming out of his body. The brass gong sounded again and he saw it now, shining, big as the sun, quivering after each blow, and someone was standing before it, striking it. BONG!—BONG! it went, slowly, echoing, each note a note of death timed to the drip of water that started up once more. "When it stops," he told himself, "I'll die," and he didn't want to die.

chapter 40

BY MORNING the fever was gone and he only felt weak. As for his dreams, they were too terrifying to resurrect and he avoided thinking of them. There was no sense in getting up, it was much easier to lie in bed; he even felt at ease. With this came a feeling of confidence, a belief that he was in control again and that he and not the drug dominated. He even fancied that he could leave off it altogether; not that he wanted to make such a drastic change when it wasn't necessary. It was too good to give up, he told himself, and everyone needed some kind of kick now and then. His was the precious powder. Only fools allowed it to best them, and he wasn't a fool; he always knew what he was doing. It was merely a question of control.

It was early yet, and the house was quiet with everyone gone. Sleep was what he needed and he'd be all right again, the weak feeling already dissipating. In a few hours he was certain he'd be up and about.

It was past noon when he opened his eyes again. He felt rested, yet the weakness remained in his limbs—as much as he tried to deny this. It was food he needed, that was the trouble. More and more of late he had been turning away from food, and there were times when he completely forgot to eat. Getting up now, he went to the kitchen, but when he opened the icebox his desire faded. All he wanted was milk, and he drank four glasses of that.

Back in the bedroom, he began to dress and, remembering the trouble he had had with his arm, he examined it, expecting

to find the bruised spot gone. Instead, there were two spots now, dark bruises. But nothing to worry about. A few days and they'd disappear.

But in back of his mind the old fear lurked. At the moment, though, there was something more pressing, his need for the drug, for he was becoming restless and the telltale feeling in his stomach was starting again. Soon he'd begin to sweat, his head would ache and the torture would begin.

But money—he needed money again and didn't have any, had no immediate way of obtaining any, either. That thought alone aggravated desire, elevated his fear so that he already felt pressed. And time was passing. Would Angel be around? Or Icepick? Searching for them now was not to his liking, for his legs felt weak. In the living room the portable radio caught his eye and for a moment the desire to take and pawn it was almost overwhelming. Yet to take it was out of the question, insane. How could he explain its disappearance if he took it? Nevertheless, he had to hurry from the house to restrain himself.

He headed directly for Angel's house but didn't find him in the cellar. He walked to Icepick's place next with the same result, then made the rounds, thinking to find one or the other. Neither was to be found and no one had any knowledge of their whereabouts. But even before he had started the search he had a feeling that he would not find them, and with every step he took the feeling intensified, and he began to shake. He climbed to a rooftop then—a favorite place for shooting up—but no one was there. He stood in the hot sun, breathing hard, and surveyed the other buildings; there was not even a sign of life. Wash hung white and still in the sun, old chimneys everywhere ready to topple—that was all.

He knew now what he had to do—pawn the radio his mother had bought. All the while that had been focused in back of his mind, all the while he felt certain this would happen, had to happen. The appointed time was now, this moment. He opened the roof door and started down the stairs with a feeling of relief and no thought of consequences.

Back in his room, with the radio pawned, he got himself ready quickly, excited and greedy now, for he wanted to get really blind and forget everything. A half a sixteenth went into the first shot and that started him rolling, hitting him

right off so that he dropped the spoon. Even then he barely knew what he was doing, but he picked up the spoon and poured more of the drug from the package, poured some more. He hit himself again, and quickly hid the works.

Suddenly the room darkened and his heart began to pound so hard he thought he was going to die. Frightened now, he wanted to get out of the house and started for the door so one of his friends might see and help him. Yet he wondered if he'd ever reach the street. Everything was going black and, as he started down the first flight, he felt the walls of the house closing in, beginning to squeeze him, and the stairs appeared to be moving up toward him, the light diminishing.

The stairs looked small and narrow and sleep was overtaking him, making him nod and step slowly. His eyes were playing tricks on him, and he was frightened, hearing the beat of his heart plain as day, jumping and skipping while he walked the landing. At the head of the last flight, he paused; the steps appeared to be merging. He shook his head, but the illusion persisted and the darkness was pressing in. He had to hurry and yet had to feel his way. The steps were growing smaller and appeared to be coming up at him. It was like a moving staircase, and the bannister was no longer there.

He started to take another step, put his foot out, and found nothing. In slow motion then it began, and head-first he went over; slow, slow, as if something were holding him back and, as the hallway went black, he fell, tumbling faster and faster now in endless flight, feeling nothing but a vast darkness gathering about him. He lay on the bottom and heard his heart thumping. From somewhere above, a woman screamed: "He's dead! He's dead!" He heard that and his heart resounded like a bass drum ready to explode the cage of his chest. But he didn't feel anything, no pain, yet he couldn't move and he thought he was dead.

Two women stood over him, he heard them talking. One dashed water in his face. The hall became crowded and a harsh, disturbing voice repeated, "Get an ambulance! Get an ambulance!" His heart thumped to the cadence of the words, and he was terrified but couldn't move. At last a familiar voice broke the babble and he knew it was Angel. Icepick was with him. They realized in an instant what had happened and they picked him up and carried him out of the hallway.

In the street he blacked out completely and came to later beside the river with Angel standing over him and pouring water down his nose. As soon as he opened his eyes, Angel began to smack him sharply, saying, "Come on, man, straighten up!" He felt himself lifted to his feet. Angel and Icepick had hold of him and they began to walk him. Made him walk, and all he knew was that he was down by the river and stoned as never before.

They walked him for over an hour before bringing him back to the house. He was able to get along without assistance by then but his legs were still weak and he barely made the stairs.

"What did you try to do, kill yourself?" Icepick said when they were seated in the living room. "Man, you were really out."

Chico told them what had happened, describing his sensations in detail, and they laughed. Then Angel wanted to know if he had anything left.

"Take it all, I'm scared to touch it now," Chico said, and he got the drug for them. When they shot up, he watched and it was too much for him, something gripped his throat and he threw up.

"You're a sick kitty," Icepick remarked. "Yeah, you better go to bed."

When Chico's mother came home, she found him in bed. The moment she saw him she knew something was wrong and wanted to call a doctor.

"No, I'll be all right, I'll be all right," he protested. But she had to do something for him, and brought an icebag for his head. A while later Paulie came home and walked into the bedroom. When he looked at Chico, he went back and shut the door, and turned, and said, "What's wrong? What did I tell you about that?"

"About what?"

"Look, don't try to fool me. I know what happened, I heard about you falling down the stairs. Some day you're going to drop dead."

Chico didn't say anything, afraid Paulie would raise his voice and let his mother know the truth. He lay there, listening. Finally he promised Paulie he wouldn't touch the stuff any more and he left. Paulie didn't believe him, but at least

he kept what he knew to himself. He's all right, Chico thought, and already his eyes were growing heavy, the light in the room dim.

He slept then, and at eight o'clock his mother came into the room, bringing his supper. Waking him, she said, "I want you to eat every bit of this. I'm worried about you. Look how thin you're getting."

"All right, so I'm getting thin. Let me alone."

"Do you have to talk like that? What's wrong with you?"

"I'm sick. Let me alone."

She relented finally and left the room, but came back almost immediately and closed the door behind her. There was a different look on her face, and he realized immediately what was wrong—she'd discovered that the radio was missing. When she asked him about it, he was prepared and told her he had pawned it, though he didn't say why. She appeared stunned by his answer. When she asked his reason, he calmly said, "I needed the money. I had to have it to pay a debt, that's all."

"But . . ."

"I had to pay a debt," he repeated, this time more sharply, then added, "You don't have to worry about it. I'll have it back."

"What kind of a debt? Who do you owe money to?"

"That's my business. Now let me eat in peace, the stuff's getting cold." He knew she didn't want Paulie to find out about the radio. She wouldn't press him either, not that she'd get anywhere even if she did, for when he raised his voice she always gave in to him—it was an old trick by which he managed to dominate her.

Even now she changed; the little anger she'd displayed was gone and she asked him why he hadn't asked for the money.

"Because I needed it in a hurry," he replied. "So stop worrying, will you? I'll get it back tomorrow."

Not that he would; he hadn't even thought of it, but he had to tell her something to get her off his neck, had to lie if only to escape the look in her eyes. And how easily he lied now, even though he had no means of reclaiming the radio. The lie itself was enough, he believed. Unexpectedly, she asked him where the money was coming from and he couldn't answer. She was suspicious, too, he thought, and he

felt uneasy. "Paulie told her," he said to himself. "She knows why I pawned it."

But he was wrong, at least about Paulie, for she asked him where the ticket was.

"Don't you believe me?" he said, warily. "I pawned the radio, I didn't sell it."

"I want the ticket."

"Why?"

"To get the radio back. I'll do it this time, but if you ever do anything like that again . . ."

"It's in my pocket." Chico pointed to his trousers draped over a chair and smiled to himself as he watched her search the pockets. She found the ticket and looked at him, saying, "Now remember what I said."

"You're swell, Mom. But let me eat, and don't worry about the money. I'll pay you back one of these days."

"You don't have to," she said, "but it better not happen again."

It was an implied threat and he knew the meaning—she'd tell his brother. But it wouldn't happen again, he told himself, and prepared to eat, sitting on the edge of the bed. Not that he was hungry but food would do him good, would get him on his feet again and keep his mother from calling the doctor. He had to force it down, though, and then lie back in bed, but to no avail. He ran to the window and vomited, then returned to bed and after a while nodded off.

Later, he awoke and heard voices from the kitchen—his mother and brother were talking in a low murmur. With a feeling that it was very late, he got up, went to the kitchen and said he was going out, that he couldn't sleep, and walked back to the bedroom when his mother began to protest.

Unexpectedly, Paulie followed him into the room and they faced each other.

"You're not going out," Paulie said. "Understand? You're staying right here."

"But it's early," Chico complained. "I'm not going to do anything."

"You're right you're not, and you're not going down for any stuff. This time you're going to stay sick."

Chico said nothing, there wasn't any use. He wasn't sick for need of the drug, not yet, but later he knew he would be, even after the overdose today. That was his fear, to be trapped

in the house without it; he had to get it tonight. Later, going to the bathroom on a pretense, he noticed that his brother had left the kitchen. He went to the kitchen and his mother asked him how he felt.

"Better," he answered. "Where's Paulie?"

"Downstairs on the stoop. Why?"

"Nothing," he said, and went back to his room. He quickly dressed and slipped out the window to the fire escape, then went to the roof, crossed the adjoining rooftops till he reached the end of the block. He was safe now, all he had to do was go down the stairs. He opened the roof door and listened. No threat, only the dark stairway. He started down.

chapter 41

IN A WEEK'S TIME the two spots on Chico's arm enlarged. Then one morning they were no longer spots but ugly holes, and this frightened him. He dosed them with iodine, covered them with a band-aid, and tried to forget about them. Three days later, when he removed the band-aid he was shocked by what he saw, for the two holes were now joined and there was but one, as large as a half-dollar, an ugly ulcerated sore that made him go sick at sight of it.

He had to do something about it, yet he couldn't go to a doctor, or a hospital. Not even his mother could help him now. In spite of his fear, he told himself, "I'll let it ride for a few weeks." When he showed it to Icepick, though, his advice was to go to a hospital. But Chico paid no heed to this suggestion. Instead, he looked up an old-time junkie who had been troubled with the same kind of sore. "You got that from a dirty needle," he told Chico. "You ought to break the habit before you get like me."

"I'm going to kick it, man," Chico said.

"But you're doing nothing but goofing off."

"I can kick it right in the house."

"Yeah, you're high right now, so don't tell me that."

Chico laughed, but afterward swore to himself that he'd

break his habit. Knew he had to, realizing that he might do something yet that he didn't want to do, anything at all. That day he didn't touch the stuff, but by late evening he was sick again and broke his promise.

The following evening he came in just before supper. His mother and Paulie were home, both in the kitchen, and by the time he opened the door it was too late to do anything but try to bluff it out, so he went through the kitchen and straight to his room. But Paulie followed on his heels so close that he didn't have time to shut the door.

It was Paulie who shut the door. He leaned back against it, staring at Chico, and said, "Come over here."

"What for?" Chico asked.

"I want to see your eyes. Yeah, what did I tell you? You've been using drugs."

"Not tonight, I'm off the stuff."

"Then how come your eyes are pin-pointed?"

"What do you mean?"

"Look, don't be so smart."

"Nobody's being smart, so let me alone."

"Don't shout at me," Paulie warned. "Don't ever."

"I ain't shouting, but why are you always after me when I told you I quit it? Why can't you let me alone?"

"Okay, so you quit it. So roll up your sleeve and let me see your arm."

This time Chico rebelled. "You're not my old man, so I don't have to roll nothing."

"Roll up your goddamned sleeves. I'm going to give you a last chance."

"Yeah, who the hell are you? You don't give me my orders!"

"I told you about shouting," Paulie said. "Now let's see your arms. Not that I have to look at them. I know you've been at it. Christ, why do you have to be so stupid?"

"I'm not using it, Paulie."

"Don't lie to me!" Paulie said sharply, and Chico raised his voice again, ignoring the fact that his mother was home. Paulie warned him to change his tone.

"Who are you to tell me anything?" Chico asked, and Paulie struck him, knocking him down. In a moment he was on his feet again and he struck back. Paulie staggered, recovered. Instead of administering the beating he was capable of giving Chico, he stood there with a look of pain and

sadness on his face. Nothing was said but, even as he hit his brother, Chico realized the enormity of his act and knew that his mother would know now. Rather than Paulie had struck back and beat him into unconsciousness. But it was too late and Paulie had finished, the warnings were at an end. Nodding his head, Paulie walked from the room. Chico stood where he was, waiting, listening for the words he knew must come; and at last he heard Paulie say to his mother, "Well, you've got a son who's a dope addict."

A stifled cry, and then his mother came running. As she reached the bedroom, she stopped and stared at Chico. "I don't believe it, I won't believe it," she said, and burst into tears. Now that she knew, Chico felt a sense of release, as if he had been waiting for this moment for a long time, anticipating it. In a way, he'd wanted it to happen, though it was the one thing he feared, for she was the last person in the world he wished to hurt. But that was over now, done. The bare electric light glared, making emphatic the barrenness and pallor of the room, a harsh splintering light in which a thousand sharp needles began to dance, and somehow he could barely see his mother. She was there but out of focus, out of reach, her words and tears didn't touch him. A curious feeling possessed him now. He saw himself, both of them there, facing each other and heard himself speaking, promising that he'd never touch it again and all the while he knew he was lying. Deep within, he realized he was caught, that there was no escape, and no real desire to escape.

Nevertheless, he made an attempt to break his habit. The next day he remained in bed all day, sleeping fitfully. Once he rose and looked at himself in the bathroom mirror, saw the shadowy lines under his eyes, and said, "What's happening to me? How did I start? Damn, I have to stop, this is going to get me, kill me in the end." Yet he knew he still wanted the drug and, back in bed again and feeling low, his stomach seemed empty. He tried to comfort himself now, thinking of the way he used to look. I was good-looking—and with the money I spend on the stuff I could buy good clothes, good shoes, but I can't stop using it. He examined his arm then, looked at the veins, and despised himself. But the urge was there to go out and get the stuff. Somehow he fought it off and slept again.

The second day was harder. He stayed in bed and didn't

answer the door. Twice Angel came and knocked and Chico lay with his eyes closed, praying for him to leave, then regretting he hadn't answered, when Angel's footsteps faded on the stairs. He tortured himself with visions. "I could be out with Angel and getting high. I wouldn't be sick," he told himself. Such thoughts prevented sleep and the day seemed without movement, the minutes passing with agonizing slowness till at last he had to get up. He turned the radio on, filled himself with milk, tried to read, and flung each comic book away.

By evening he had to go out. At supper he'd sat in silence at the table, then got up and returned to his room to lie in bed. But the night exerted a pull now, created a feeling of loneliness. Outside he heard the sounds of traffic, of wheels zooming through the block, and the house seemed remote, his own apartment haunted. Floor boards squeaked, the windowpanes shook to a mysterious force. He felt very sick now, sharp pains struck through his stomach, his whole body oozed sweat. When he looked at his arms, the veins appeared to be throbbing and he had to turn away and occupy himself somehow—but there were only comic books and he flung them aside, too restless to do anything. "But I can't go out, no matter what happens," he told himself, and the torture continued, the room appearing to grow smaller now, stuffier, hotter. It was hard for him to breathe, and as the night deepened and he finally knew that he was going out, he felt relieved.

The window drew him and looking out, he saw the houses across the street all alight, the lamppost blazing on the street below, felt the excitement of the night as a magnetic force drawing him.

Turning around, he walked from the room. His mother was in the kitchen and he met her questioning eyes with a veiled look and knew what was in her mind, the inevitable question that would come. Anticipating it, he said, "I'm going out for a while—for a walk. I'll be back soon."

Doubt and fear showed in his mother's eyes, and she barely controlled her lips. "Stay in tonight," she said. "For me. You're my life, you have to stop for my sake, for your own sake!"

"I know all about it, so don't harp on me. Let me alone."

"Don't you see you're ruining us, killing yourself?" she went on. "It's the worst thing you could ever do."

"But I've been in for two days, I have to go out. Don't you trust me?"

Deaf to his words, she wanted to see his arm, and he showed her the one without the ulcer. "There do you see?" he said, but she went on, saying, "Stop while you can or you'll end up bad. You'll rob and steal."

"But I'm not doing anything," he answered. "Do you think I'm an idiot? That's the worse thing in the world, accusing your own son." As he spoke, his guilt irritated him, yet he didn't want to hurt her, didn't want her to know how badly off he was.

"I'll be back soon," he promised and turned away. With his hand on the doorknob he paused for his mother was speaking again. "Which road will you take if you die?" she asked. "The road lined with flowers, or the hard road?" When he could not answer, she continued, "You should take the hard road of thorns and rocks because God chooses that for you—because the road of thorns and rocks leads to the road of glory, the other to evil."

He closed the door after him quietly, and faced the dim stairway with those words still in his mind, then went down to the street. A feeling of apprehension filled him now, he was afraid of himself, afraid of what might happen. Only force of will kept him from going back, and he walked in fear of meeting anyone he might know. He met no friend and started back thinking, If I see anybody, I'll duck in a hallway. Halfway home he found himself almost running, breathing hard.

As he reached the door an overwhelming feeling took him. The threat which had followed him through the streets was gone and he felt safe, secure. I beat it, I got it, he thought. In the house he was able to face his mother as if he were a new person. Yet, as she began to talk again, he found himself thinking of the streets. If he were out there, he'd be shooting up, getting high. But he had to break these thoughts and he couldn't listen to his mother. In the living room he turned on the radio, and finally his mother went out. This was unexpected, and he was tempted to go out again. To relieve the feeling he arose and forced himself to go to bed, and there, tossing restlessly, he thought, I hope I sleep all

night, dream all night, I hope I don't wake up. But look what I'm missing.

The terrible urge came back then and only the fact that he had succeeded in going out before and coming back without anything happening, kept him from rising and dressing now and running out of the house. "Only one more day. That's all, one more day and I'll bust it," he told himself, and the monologue went on and on, unreeling images swept through his brain as his sweating, tortured body demanded its quota of the drug he'd kept from it—and finally he slept.

chapter 42

ON THE THIRD DAY he was sick again, and desperate. Would he die? His hands went over his body, his legs, arms, neck. Sweat, sweat, sweat—the horrible hollow feeling in his stomach, nothing there, nothing . . . and no relief, no one to help.

Break the habit, he thought again. I have to. But it was only himself breaking. Stay in, don't go out, don't see any one. How many days now since he'd first said that, how long since the last delirious high, the stroll through Heaven? The nodding dreamlike half-sleep to which his mind had been conditioned now returned, but only to taunt him, aggravating the pain in his stomach, making him want to cry.

Rolling over now, he stared at the ceiling through dark aqueous light and Carmen's face appeared before him. "*Putita!*" he said in Spanish, but she watched him, unmoved. "*Whore!*" But if she were only here now, if she knocked, he knew he'd run to the door and let her in. She'd have the stuff as she always did, and she'd give it over, too, or money to get it. He'd twist her arm, bang her one in the face if she didn't give.

He'd never been able to make her cry, though, no matter what he did, what he said, what he took from her. Her expressionless face came to him again and she stared with somnolent eyes. Was that why he'd always wanted to hurt her—only to see her cry? She never would, her dark face always remained the same.

But she'd fooled him, not telling him she had the habit, or that she pushed the stuff. Was she afraid to tell him—just as he had been afraid to tell her? But that was in the beginning when he didn't have the habit, at least when he thought he was in control. He'd only snorted then. And that night long ago on the roof. She hadn't been afraid to go up. No doubt she expected it, but not the way it happened. Nor did he—for he knocked her down with his fist; but why, when he knew she was ready to submit, and had come for that very reason? And then, afterward, discovering the punctures in her arm. Even now he almost smiled when he thought of it. Hiding it from each other—hiding it from her when she was already a main-liner, taking the needle. They laughed about it then. And after that, no hiding it—no stopping. The next stop for him was the main-line. "The kick is better, faster, the high higher," Carmen explained. "It's like Heaven, you'll think you're in a new world."

He'd been afraid, but there was always fear, even from the moment when he'd smoked his first stick of marihuana. That was how it had begun, he realized that now. The habit had started with that first marihuana cigarette. He'd tried it because he was curious and wanted a new kind of thrill, wanted to prove himself, too.

Closing his eyes, he recalled that sultry evening when Justino, an older friend, had introduced him to the weed which was already making legends in the neighborhood. "Do you want to try it?" Justino had asked him and he nodded, willing. Then, frightened, he asked himself "Yes or no? Yes or no?" "Well?" Justino had said, waiting. "Yes," he had answered, and thought, This is going to make me the biggest guy on the block.

That was how it had started, with a stick of marihuana that had made him feel like a king. Next had come heroin, the bigger kick. His introduction to the drug was similar, his fear greater. He'd sniffed it from the bent cover of a matchbox in a dirty hallway and thought he'd been cheated, expecting an immediate kick which didn't come till he started walking home. Suddenly, then, the street changed before his eyes and he felt his body grow infinitely strong. That night he couldn't sleep, feeling cats' paws at his throat, and hearing someone walking back and forth, hour after hour, on the dim-lit landing beyond his room.

As for the needle, he'd sworn he would never take it. If it hadn't been for Carmen, in the hall beyond the stairs—"It's so nice, so good," she said. "It goes right into your blood and you're high." But he couldn't hit himself, couldn't find the vein. It was she who put the spike in, tightened the belt around his arm to raise the veins, tapped the needle in, then showed him how to boot it for a bigger kick, mixing his blood with the drug, drawing it from his arm, shooting it and drawing back—till the final bang.

After that it was nothing but the main-line, the high of highs. No getting off it, no going back. He'd tried, tried a dozen times, but Carmen was always there with more. No need to ask; she gave it to him, and money, too, but wouldn't say who she was pushing for. One thing she never told him, one thing he could never slap out of her. Who was the guy? Who? He almost broke her arm trying to force her to tell one night, but she kept it secret, wouldn't cry, not a tear. Out of fear? Or because she needed the stuff so much? Wasn't that why she peddled it, so as to have it always—and to have it for him, too, so she could keep him for herself? He wondered now if it had really been like that. The idea had never occurred to him before.

If only he hadn't been so greedy for more, for the junkie's dream to have mountains of it, thousands of caps, almost killing himself with that overdose days ago. Even now he could see himself on the stairway, the darkness pressing in, the ever so deep, ever so long stairs, and he unable to help himself, unable to feel his legs, the bannister not there, the walls closing in, squeezing him, and the steps growing smaller, coming up at him—and then the misstep, and nothing there—only himself tumbling, tumbling faster and faster in endless flight.

The frightening vision halted the trend of his thoughts for some moments as his heart began to pound; then, returning, they took another tack. He thought of Carmen again—a rumor in the neighborhood said that the Law had finally caught up with her. "That's only a rumor," Chico told himself. But if she were only here! It was on this very bed that he'd taken the needle for the second time. Carmen had put it in for him again, cooked the stuff in a spoon first, in the dim-lit room, the match flaring like the sun, the flame vividly yellow and alive, bent and moving back and forth under the shiny spoon;

and Carmen's hands, arms, the dark smooth expressionless face and yellow eyes lit by the flame—intent on the spoon where the stuff was already cooking, a greyish liquid now.

He'd watched till she drew it up into the syringe and commanded him to hold out his arm, and for some reason he was afraid. Was it fear of getting an air bubble? The point of the needle cold on his skin, then the soft tapping with her fingernail as she sent the needle on its way. "Take it out!" he said, but she only looked at him, and he heard her calmly say, "It's in. If I take it out, I can't hit you again."

And then he saw his blood come up in the syringe and was frightened more. "Loosen it," Carmen ordered, and, as he released the handkerchief he was holding around his arm, more blood filled the syringe, a quick flow now. Carmen pushed it back into the vein and let it rise again, saying, "How do you feel?" "All right," he answered, and by then she'd taken the needle out and was already cleaning the works. Feeling strange, his arm numb and his stomach moving, he watched her put the works away in an eyeglass case, for this time she'd kicked off first—tapped the needle in slowly as she squinted. When she put the record on the phonograph, she was goofed already, her eyes almost closed. She hardly spoke, neither of them did, listening to the music. When the record spun out, she had to leave, but he was afraid to trust his legs yet. "I'll meet you downstairs," he told her, and waited five minutes before he followed, stopping halfway down to sit on a step in order to get hold of himself, before he could go on.

Carmen was gone when he reached the street but some of the boys were around, and they knew as soon as they saw him. "Chico's bl—d," one said, and another asked if he wanted some beer. No, he wanted a sandwich. Thirsty, terribly thirsty, and yet he asked for a sandwich but never got it down, for everything he'd had that day suddenly came up on him. And Carmen was gone.

"Where?" he asked aloud now, angry because she wasn't here to give him a fix. The pain gnawing at his stomach again, the terrible empty feeling, but he had to stifle it, stick it out. He believed, if he tried hard enough, that he could beat it. Had to, had to—or else China would . . .

What had she said? Leave him, Quit him? But she'd said

that a hundred times, always on him because of the stuff. Not like Carmen. Why couldn't she be like Carmen, he thought, but only because he needed a lift so badly now. For he'd never given a rap about Carmen. It was China he wanted, needed, because she was good, someone worth having. And wasn't that why he was suffering now, trying to make good so that he could go back to her?

If he could only hold on, tight—then she'd be proud of him. He'd be able to call at the house again. Again? After all he'd done? With the whole neighborhood knowing what he was? Yes, he'd beat it this time, show them all that it didn't control him, he controlled it, and that was the truth. Why couldn't they understand? But he had the yearning even now, and not a cap in the house. Well, he knew, if he had the jive he wouldn't touch it, he told himself. But now, lying down with a cigarette, he felt the cold sweat under his arms, the bed all wet beneath him—soaked, soaked, and the cramps in his stomach.

Suddenly he broke, thinking, I've got to get it! Got to get it—but how, without money? His suits, everything—he'd flung in the pawnbrokers, and the tickets were sold. Nothing in the house, his mother's room locked since her linen had disappeared. The radio, he thought; but no, he couldn't do that again. Or could he?

He knew he could, would, and had to get up, had to get out of the house as quickly as possible before he took the radio again. With his jacket on he went to the kitchen and, from below in the house, heard the record, "Cuban Mamba." He listened intently now. It sounded happy, crazy, reminding him of his own people, and he thought: We're sad when we hear American music, but when we hear our own, we all jump up and dance. He recalled passing through his his neighborhood and hearing music that made his heart beat faster, and he thought: Which place would I like to go past—a quiet place, or a place where everyone is happy? For his people were happy—gay, not sad. They could be happy without anything happening, he told himself, then wondered why they should be happy, what they had to be happy about.

In that moment the meaning of all the music he'd ever heard began to unwind for him and he realized that his people were not really happy. They're sad, he said, but with

music they cover the sadness in their hearts. They're sad 'as anybody could ever be. Yeah, people can laugh and not be happy, cause their hearts are sad. A girl can say, "I hate you," but it's not from the heart, it's from her lips; she's trying to cover up. If a girl leaves a guy, he might drink till he drops dead, showing he doesn't care, but inside he does. But the pain doesn't come from a record, you put it on to be happy, and you're not. A record sounds gay, but underneath you can hear crying, feel somebody's sadness. Under the drums you hear the beat; on top you hear a lot of happiness but underneath there is pain. And when you listen enough, you can hear crying. The music is just the cover-up of the hurt.

Below in the house, the music was still playing as he opened the kitchen door, that crazy Spanish song which he'd listened to day after day, week after week, yet heard only one word—mamba—repeated over and over, part of his brain, the rest of the song like sludge inside his skull—the one word loud, the voices frantic. He paused at the head of the stairs, listening again. What did it remind him of now? The house, the neighborhood, old tenements, all his people crowded together like animals, trapped in this area? He hated it, the houses, the neighborhood, hated his own people, he thought. But this was their neighborhood, they'd made it theirs, pushing out the others, more of their own coming in every day, new faces from Puerto Rico, more every day to crowd the overcrowded rooms. But what matter how many? No one cared, least of all himself—another boarder, another cousin, father, Marine Tiger

Halfway down the stairs, he stopped and shook his head. Marine Tiger. He hated the name, hated its meaning, remembering when he'd first heard it flung in his face and didn't understand. Now he did, now he knew too well, for it meant rat-infested tenements, toilets in the halls, garbage in yards and streets, it meant being called a dirty spik, meant being hungry, poor, ashamed—yet proud. Marine Tiger! He spat the words out. Marine Tiger—a newcomer, a greenhorn from Puerto Rico? More than that it meant, but let anyone call him that!

Now he stood in the vestibule, the record upstairs still playing, the high-pitched voices reaching out for him as if to draw him back. Mamba! Mamba! repeated over and over again

as if the disc were spinning inside his brain. Mamba! Mamba!—insane chant, taunt, it caught him again, taking him back across the miles he'd flown in a crowded plane from San Juan, then farther—to the town whose unpaved streets had felt the tattoo of his bare and calloused feet.

It was there in his mind now, the cane fields vivid; like the sea, he pictured them, remembered walking through the cane and feeling the great stalks moving, the wind rustling them, a bird calling, and then the stillness and his fear, fear of the crazy one who'd run naked through the town one day. "Lock all the doors! Lock them." his grandmother had cried, but he had peeked and seen the madman's brown and naked body flash in the sun as he passed the house, heard him laugh, and saw the crowd chase him, armed with sticks to beat him, and carrying ropes to tie him, but they didn't catch him, for he reached the tree by the bridge and, laughing down at the crowd, finally hanged himself before their eyes—yet didn't die, haunting the cane fields still carrying the knife with which he'd cut the throats of their goats. Now the cane fields waved before Chico's eyes again, a great green seething sea in the hot sun, and he was a little boy once more, with a stone in his hand, waiting, telling himself, "I'm not scared, let him come"—but the madman with the knife never came—for the music broke in, the cane fields faded and he heard the word Mamba! Mamba!—repeated like a cry of pain now, a plaintive cry which couldn't be drowned or answered.

He escaped into the street, pulling the door open and half stumbling out to the sidewalk—still sick, still sweating, his whole body rebelling for want of the white drug that cannonballed through his mind and drove away his troubles, erecting golden dreams and fantasies.

Now to get the stuff—he couldn't hold out any longer; he wanted to run but felt too weak and went down the block with sweat pouring from him. Oh, God, the feeling in his stomach, hollow, hollow, and his head aching. A woman stared at him; she knew, they all knew, and he didn't care; he wanted the stuff.

No one was on the corner. He went to the poolroom, asked for Carlos and was told: "The flatfoots busted him down last night with a load—he's in the Tombs." Well, there were other pushers, but what about money? He tried to borrow a

dollar and was refused, tried to borrow a quarter and was laughed at.

Cursing, he went out. Where was Angel? Picked up too? Had the bulls swept the neighborhood, or were the boys hitting up in a new place, in some dingy cellar, or on a roof? He had no time to hunt. Down the block the glittering window of a door drew his eyes. Pupi! Pupi would trust him for a couple of caps. He moved toward the house where Pupi lived, shoved the door open and went up the stairs, three flights, and knocked, but no one answered; he knocked again, and still no answer, then he smashed at the door with his fist and shouted, "Open up! Open up!" But Pupi didn't open the door, no one did, and Chico struck it again, then kicked the lower panel savagely, splintering it, and stood back, for another door had opened on the landing. An old woman stood there, her eyes like tiny bits of shiny coal in a brown and withered face; beyond her Chico could see part of a cluttered room and an enormous black candle burning.

The odor of incense drifted out to the landing. The witch was screaming at him, had been for some moments, but only now did he realize she was screaming in Spanish, a volleying stream of filth. He stood back, amazed, wondering how long she'd been there, then heard the others, for all doors were open, the landings above and below crowded, people on the stairs, men, women, children, the medley of their excited voices raising a confused din, a threat to him now, and he backed against the bannister and looked down. Not that way. Too many people, and probably the police were on the way. He turned and saw the old woman again, close, still screaming at him, moving in, and he tried to back away but the bannister stopped him.

With no choice, he shoved the old woman out of the way and started for the stairs, hearing the angry cries of those behind and below him, but the cries of those above were keyed to a different note, fear in them, as he flushed them before him. The stairs were clear, the last door slamming shut on the landing above as he reached it and ran for the last flight and the greyish submarine light that fell through the skylight overhead, and so far away. His legs felt ready to buckle but he kept climbing, a thousand steps to eternity. He burst through the door into burning summer light and kept

running, raising a flock of startled pigeons that clapped and scattered into the air; kept going over four rooftops, while the startled birds assembled high above the tenements in a compact design of fear; then scrambled down a fire escape, crossed a yard, climbed a fence and plunged into the dark protective gloom of a cellar, and waited there till the violence of his heart subsided. Then he came up to the street and the sunlight of another block, needing the drug more than ever now, and no one, no friend around to give him a buzz.

He walked to the corner, and a block away saw a familiar figure disappearing through a doorway. Angel! He shouted and started after him, tried to run and couldn't, weak again, and there in the hallway of the house shouted up the stairs. Angel had reached the landing before the roof, and his answer came from above. Chico started up the stairs, he'd have gone up anyway, but now he knew he was in reach of it, knew what Angel was up to. Angel was waiting, Icepick with him, and they had the stuff, Icepick already making the fix.

"Just in time, man," Angel said.

"I'm dying," said Chico. "God, I've been off it too long, long enough to kill a man."

"You're back on now," said Angel, smiling.

Later, they entered the movie house blind and sat down upstairs. The others nodded off immediately, but Chico, repeating over and over again, "I can control it, I can control it," felt the drug all through his body, all through his brain, then closed his eyes and slept.

Darkness manufactured the dream; the huge curtain lifted and he was watching a bare street which could have been one of any from 100th to 116th, but no people, no doors, no windows, only towering walls, blinding sunlight, and he was sick again, desperate—when he saw the black box on the sidewalk, the only object on a naked concrete plain. When he picked it up and opened it, he found it filled to the brim with pure white heroin, but this was no place to use it, a thousand eyes seemed to be watching him as he clapped the cover on and hurried away. He knew exactly where to go now; a friend had told him of this high-joint, and a session was ready to start when he arrived.

Three knocks on the door and his friend's name gave him

entry. No lights in the hall, a blue light in the first room, a dim orange light in the second, chairs and a dozen half-discernible faces like stone. The woman who'd opened the door followed him into the second room where a record was playing. He looked at the woman; big, ponderous, her eyes almost closed—she was high, hardly able to hold the spoon in her trembling hand. "What's happening?" she said to him.

And he asked for four pills, knowing he had to buy to stay for the session, but he didn't mention the box he'd found, for no one on earth would share that with him.

A man entered the dim-lit room then and announced: "Everybody can get off now!" and another record slid into place—A Kiss in the Dark—a quartet singing the number while everyone in the room began to hit himself with a needle.

Later, how much later he didn't know, Chico heard the same record playing, the music softer, far away and unearthly. He'd nodded off, but now he lifted his head, his eyes almost slits, the light in the room dimmer. The girls in the room had disrobed, and one stood in front of him.

"Do you often come here?" she asked, and he nodded, watching her, thinking. She's no more than sixteen, if she's that. "My first time," she went on, and she thought it was nice. He nodded; she was still talking, her name was Carmen. "Carmen what?" he heard himself ask, but she didn't answer, for the woman who ran the place had come back, a dim swaying hulk in the center of the room, her voice too loud, the words familiar enough but their meaning somehow obscure. "Anyone can get a room," she announced, and Chico stood up, still drowsy, but finally he understood the naked invitation. He grasped Carmen's arm, leading her into a room where there was nothing but darkness and then lost himself and her as she received him. Lost all desire, caring for nothing more than to lie there with his eyes closed while the muted song from the other room played on and on and on.

But, presently, he heard a disturbing whisper; the girl was saying something and he didn't want to listen, tried to shut her out, but she persisted, her voice growing louder till the taunt rang in his head. "I should have picked another," she said, and he didn't care, didn't react till she repeated the taunt once more, then he struck her as she pushed him away and tried to run, knocked her to the floor and threw her back on the bed, but he failed this time, too, and the girl escaped

him; it was simpler to let her go. He was glad she had gone; he wanted to lie quietly with the music—nothing else in the world.

But he remembered the box he'd found, not that he wanted to hit himself again, for he was high now, but later, later he knew he'd want it, need it, and there was enough to shoot himself to Heaven, enough to stay high for a week. But at least, he had to look in the box again, greedy for the sight of the stuff, for the smell and taste of it. The box was in his jacket which he'd dropped on the floor, too far away to reach. He had had to rise to retrieve it, and put on the light to see. Even then the room appeared dim, the walls wavering slightly and all dimensions questionable. But that didn't matter; he reached for his pocket, and then the whole world seemed to shake, ready to come crashing down, for the box, when he opened it, yawned emptily. Nothing there, not a speck. Overcome with anger, he rushed to the window and flung the box to the sidewalk below.

Then he stood there watching, till a man came along, and the incredible happened, for the man picked up the box, opened it, wet his finger and tasted the fine white powder which had somehow returned to the box. The man hurried away; there was only one thing to do, follow him and get it back. He ran out of the house and was just in time to see the man enter a doorway. Chico followed, bursting through the doorway to find the man in the vestibule with the box in his hands.

"You got my stuff!" Chico said, and drew a knife, desperate enough to kill for it now, but the man gave it up without a struggle. To make certain, Chico looked in the box again, and it was full to the brim with the drug. Hands shaking and his breath coming in great sobs, he replaced the lid. His once more! Found and lost, and found again, but now he meant to take no chance. With the box in his hands, he hurried back to the house, to the room where he could be alone.

This time he locked the door, set the box down and took out his works, put water in the spoon, readied the match and tightened the needle in the syringe. His hands were trembling again, his whole body shaking, but in a minute he'd feel an infinite calm, his bloodstream thickening with the drug. Already he felt stronger, reborn, and he reached for the box, lifted its cover—and found it empty. Even a grain, a

tiny speck of the stuff, would help him appease his desperate need, a single tiny speck—but there was nothing at all in the box. . .

With a start he woke; the dream had vanished and he was there in the movie yet, his head aching, for he was down from his high and the sickness was beginning anew. As he stirred, Angel awoke in the seat beside him.

"Got any more stuff?" Chico asked, feeling the need of it enough to shoot up there this very moment, but Angel had nothing on him, had no money, either, only the self-same need.

They couldn't sit there now, they had to get it, had to find a way, but outside the movie house they knew they'd come to the abyss. It yawned before them, opening its great black mouth to gather them in.

And then they were walking. It was night now, rain falling, a deluge which had emptied the streets, but they were oblivious to the torrent, seeking their prey on a darker, lonelier street. Under the glittering marquee they had already discussed what they had to do.

But no one seemed to be out. They moved from one dark street to another, then turned a corner and stopped. For ahead of them a man moved down the block with a staggering gait, a drunken prize that made them turn and grin at each other. This would be even simpler than snatching a pocketbook.

They closed distance rapidly, and were upon him. Angel struck with his fist, but the man only staggered, didn't go down, and then Chico struck him on the side of the head with a bottle, caught him again when he didn't go out. Blood then, and the rain falling, blood and rain, and he couldn't move, the bottle, which he'd picked from the gutter, still in his hand. It was Angel who went through the drunk's pockets and stripped him of his wallet. Then they ran.

In a cellar by the light of a match, Angel counted the money from the wallet. Chico found the bottle still in his hand and thought of the rain again and the blood. I must have killed him, he thought, I must have killed him, and for the moment he was frightened by the monstrous design of his act, the weight of his guilt—yet in another moment, moved by the need over which he had no command, he turned to Angel, and said, "What's the loot, man? How much did we get?"

chapter 43

THE INEVITABLE caught up with Chico and Angel the following week when they went to a new roof landing to shoot up. Chico was readying the drug when a woman opened a door on the landing below, looked up the stairs and asked what was going on.

"Never mind what's going on," Chico answered and, when she warned them both to leave, Angel cursed and silenced her.

She went down the stairs then and they paid no further heed to her, but soon enough quick heavy footsteps ascended the stairs. Both Chico and Angel looked down, and seeing a man below, they broke for the roof door, Chico making for the fire escape. As he scrambled down past windows, he heard alarmed voices cry out but paid no attention, keeping on till he reached the first landing. From there he dropped to the ground below, fell, picked himself up and looked about for a way out.

There was none that he could see, but even then he didn't realize he was trapped and he ran for a fence. A chorus of voices followed him from the windows above. Scrambling over the fence, he looked toward the cellar door of the house, saw the heavy lock on it and ran at the next fence. As he jumped, the rotten wood gave beneath his weight and collapsed. He fell on his back, stunned. Groping to his feet, he looked around in bewilderment, seeing no way of escape, the voices from the windows confusing and frightening him now.

Those cries froze his blood but set him moving again. He climbed over the fence, and found himself in a yard with no exit. Pausing now, he tried to gather his wits. He had just decided to go back the way he had come when a policeman burst from the cellar of the house. Losing all presence of mind, Chico began to run, flinging his works away as he ran. The policeman shouted and Chico turned and came back, aware of the watchers in the windows above and the awful silence.

"What did you throw away?" That was the first question. "Nothing," he answered, but a woman cried out from a window and doomed him. A moment later two more policemen ap-

peared and, while they watched, the first searched the back of the yard till he found the works.

Chico froze; there was no way out now. They took him down into the cellar and shoved him against a wall. He began to tremble.

"Is this yours?" one of the policemen said, holding up the works.

Chico shook his head and a brutal fist in the mouth stunned him. As he covered himself with his hands, another policeman moved in. "We don't want lies," he said, and followed the warning with a blow to Chico's stomach that dropped him to his knees.

"All right, the works are mine," he admitted.

"Why didn't you say so in the first place? Where's the drugs?"

"I shot the stuff up."

"Yeah, that's why you were in the yard. Where did you hide it?"

Chico had risen to his feet but when he answered "I don't know," a blow caught him in back of the neck and sent him down again. A kick broke the skin on his shin, a merciless hand grasped his hair and dragged him up and, between blows the questions were shot at him: "Where's the drugs? Where do you get the stuff? Around here?"

"I haven't got it!" he answered. "I shot it up."

They relented then and took him out to the street. The woman who'd called from the window was waiting and she told them where he had come from. They took him back to the landing where he'd shot up and there they found a soda bottle, sooted spoon, candle and some blood. Downstairs again, as they were about to take him out, the door opened and Angel came in, followed by two policemen.

It began all over again, but this time Angel was the victim. They took him in back of the stairs and the questioning started, the blows followed. Once, from the front of the hall, Chico saw Angel's hand on the floor as if he were down and trying to push himself up. When they finished with him, his face was bruised, his eyes watery—but he hadn't talked. He was shoved toward the front of the hall and, with Chico, half dragged outside where an excited crowd stared and pointed at them. At the precinct station, they were booked, fingerprinted, and questioned again.

At six in the morning they entered the Tombs, were processed and taken to court. From there they were sent to the bullpen to await the wagon, along with a group that included two rapists, two robbers and a numbers racket peddler. Coffee that tasted like water and a piece of bread with jam was handed out but Chico couldn't eat. After the meal they were handcuffed in pairs. No one said a word but, as the manacles snapped together on his wrists, Chico said to himself: "Now I feel like a real criminal."

Two by two they were led from bullpen to pie-wagon, thirty in all. No one could move in there. Chico was standing, and as the wagon started he heard the others responding with grim humor to the situation.

"Now I'll see all my old friends," said one prisoner, "and get my rest and food."

A cracked voice answered. "But the coffee's not as good as Longchamps'." When the laughter died out, a quieter, harder voice from the anonymous depths of the van said, "I should have killed that guy I hit so he couldn't testify against me."

And the wagon rolled on toward the prison, to another bullpen with its jumble of human flesh. By four in the afternoon the bullpen was empty and traffic to the cells had ceased. Chico had been lifted to his tier in an ancient elevator and even then he felt the terror of being locked in, the fear which had lived with him come true. With belt and belongings taken from him, he was marched to his cell. The door clanged behind him as he stepped in, and the sound of iron vibrated in his head.

"Well, this is what I was looking for," he said to himself. Examining his cell, he felt like a trapped animal that already knew the impossibility of escape. A toilet, an iron bed and an inch of mattress met his eyes, three walls of steel and a barred door. A voice from another cell called out: "Hey, Twenty, what are you here for?"

"They caught me with a set of works."

"Aw, that's a meatball rap, you'll get out tomorrow."

"Yeah, have you got the key?"

Laughter followed this retort, but not till an hour later did Nineteen call out again. This time he said, "Hey, Twenty, where do you buy your stuff? How's the drugs out there?"

"Still good."

"Ah, when I get out, I want an ounce. Do you know any dealers?"

As Chico opened his mouth to answer, Number Eighteen said in Spanish: "Don't tell him nothing, he's a rat." Duly warned, Chico admitted that he didn't have any big connections but bought his drugs off the street, then changed the subject and asked Nineteen what he was in for.

"Impersonating the law and grand larceny," the voice said. Chico allowed the conversation to slide and called out to Angel in Spanish, warning him of the squealer in Nineteen. "Keep it quiet, tell him nothing," he said.

"Crazy kid. How do you like this place?" Angel said.

"It ain't like home."

"Well, it ain't too bad, and we got a mattress. At least it's better than a police station."

At seven the small light was burning in Chico's cell and the tier was quiet but for the footfalls of the guard who kept counting his charges at intervals. A confused old man, he came to Chico's cell twice and asked for the squealer in Number Nineteen, forgetting he'd taken him out to deliver his information to those waiting below. "Where'd he go?" he'd say and, when Chico answered, he'd nod and ask, "Does your mother know you're here? She must know. Does she know? Sure she knows," and walk away.

"Hey, I think he's crazy," Angel said as he listened from his cell.

Silence then, and Chico took off his shoes and socks and stretched on his bed. His mind was drifting now and he remembered coming in, remembered the long walk along the tier, faces behind bars, remarks, the clang of the cell door closing behind him, footsteps going away, going away forever.

His sickness had begun hours ago, and now it was really on him. He started to sweat, his eyes watered, and cramps in his stomach doubled him up. The cell felt hot and stuffy, smaller now, he thought, smaller, and it was closing in inch by inch. He sat up and lit a cigarette, but the illusion remained, the walls were closing in and he had to close his eyes. He opened them and the movement began again. He had to get up and walk then—five paces one way and five back. He found himself counting steps and grabbed the bars, clenching his fists so hard that his nails were cutting into his hands. Then he walked the cell again with the faraway sounds of the free world coming to him in pulsing murmurs, the night sounds of the world he'd lost.

When the lights went out it grew quieter, but Chico, lying on his bed, felt that every man was awake and listening. He raised his hand in the dark and barely saw it. He thought of the stuff then and wondered how long he'd last, how much torture he could stand before screaming. "Man, I want to get out of here, I can't stand it, I can't stand it," he said to himself, and lay still when he heard a moan from Angel's cell.

"What's happening?" he asked.

"I'm sick, man. I'm freezing, I got the chills," Angel complained.

"And I'm sweating to death," Chico said. "You better take my blanket." He got up and passed his blanket to Angel, then stood quietly, listening. A cell door had clanged shut far down the tier. Another one, he thought, and heard the guard's footsteps fading away.

At eleven he was still tossing on his bed, but in the moments when he lay still he heard the motor again. For more than an hour now it had been running, quietly, as if in some secret place within the jailhouse, humming, louder, softer, till the sound seemed to be in his brain. It seemed as if he could hear everything—traffic moving, anonymous sounds outside—but there were moments when it stopped and the world suddenly went dead. Straining to hear, Chico said to himself, "You can't hear nothing." At midnight, the motor faded again and silence settled in. From a cell along the tier a prisoner began screaming, "I'm sick! I'm sick! Let me out!" A metallic banging followed the outburst, then the sound of vomiting. Chico lay tense and strained, holding himself back from jumping up and beating the walls of his own cell.

Later, he had to get up. It was quiet now, only the low throbbing of the motor could be heard. The dark walls were closing in. He leaned against one as if to hold it back, then tried to push open the cell door, thinking it might have been left unlocked. Hearing the guards talking at the end of the tier, he cursed them and listened. The guards were quiet now, and he strained to hear, sweating, but no one came down the passage. He waited, closing his eyes, and his breath began to come heavily; he felt that he couldn't move, couldn't breathe. He wanted to scream out now but, immediately on opening his eyes, the feeling left him and he flung himself on his bed. Not until much later, with the sound of Angel's stifled groans loud in his head, did Chico fall asleep.

There were four days of sickness for Chico; and on the seventh day the tier-man came to tell him he was on the court list. His name was called with Angel's and two others from the same tier, and he was let out of his cell. They were marched to the elevator and were taken down to the bullpen, where a guard checked them off by name, handcuffed them together and marched them out to the pie-wagon. From there they were driven to court, and put in cells to await their fate with the judge.

At last Chico was called. He stood before the judge now, a small, half-bald, bespectacled man, and heard the rustle of the papers in his hands, felt his own heart booming and was frightened, trembling, waiting for the judge to speak. In that moment, he recalled his mother's words and they flashed through his mind now: "Which road will you take if you die—the road lined with flowers, or the hard road?" Which road? he thought, and lifted his eyes, for the judge had begun to speak.

glossary

H—*heroin*

Horse

Stuff

Crap

Jive

Junk

Dope

White stuff

White God

Junkie—*addict*

Main-liner

Horsehead

H-man

Pot—*marihuana*

Weed

Reefer

Kitty—*boy or man*

Cat

Stud

Stud: *also a masculine girl*

Broad—*girl*

Chick

Beat—*"sick." In need of the drug.*

Beat stuff—*heroin of poor quality—adulterated to the extent that it has little or no kick.*

Blind—*feeling extremely high*

Boot—*to draw blood from the vein into the syringe, mix it with the drug and shoot both back into the vein.*

Bread—*money*

Buzz—*to get a slight kick from the drug. Also to irritate someone.*

C—*cocaine*

Cap—*capsule*

Cap up—*to fill the caps*

Cold turkey—*the attempt to break the habit by complete abstention from the drug.*

Coming down—*the state when one feels the effect of the drug receding.*

Con—*to gain something by using one's wits rather than by violence.*

Connection—*to have contact with a pusher.*

Cool—*casual, on the ball, smooth, etc.*

Cool it—*let's go, watch out, beat it, beware, be careful, be quiet, stop, leave the scene, etc.*

Cop—*to buy the drug. Also to succeed in an amatory affair.*

Crazy—*great, good, wonderful, okay*

Cut—*to adulterate the drug*

Dealer—*the one who sells to the pusher. Also a pusher.*

Dig—*to understand, watch, listen, see, analyze, etc.*

Down—*down from the high, no longer feeling the effect of the drug.*

Down cat—*a good guy*

Down for it—*ready, willing*

Feeling the kick—*physical and mental reaction to the drug.*

A fix—*a shot of the drug*

Fish—*a particular form of dancing favored by addicts, very slow, intimate and suggestive. The dancers barely move from one spot, for the body is employed rather than the feet.*

Flicks—*movies*

Goof off—to nod. Also to do something in the wrong manner, to fumble, or do something silly.

Goofing—high, nodding. Also to make-believe, joke, play around.

Grand—to show off, a grandstand play.

Habit—addiction

High—the state reached when one feels the full effect of the drug.

Hi, —.o know

Hit—to reach the vein with the needle, which is sometimes difficult for the beginner, or for the older addicts whose veins finally collapse.

Hit up—same as take off; to take the drug

Jive—talk, lie, exaggerate, etc

Kick—same as boot

Kick it—to break the habit

Kick-happy—to kick an unusual number of times.

Lemon—same as beat stuff, but usually with no kick at all. A substitute for the real thing. The buyer has been swung.

Loot—money or anything gained from a robbery

Low—down from a high on the edge of feeling "sick."

To main—act of taking the drug by way of the needle into the large vein in either arm.

Main-line—the large vein in either arm

Main-liner—one who "hits" the main. Freely, one who takes the needle.^b

The man—policeman, detective. Also a pusher.

Marine Tiger—a recent arrival from Puerto Rico.

Nod—when one is high, to enter into that dreamlike sphere between sleep and wakefulness, to doze off.

Off it—off the drug

On the stuff—addicted

Pad—a room or apartment used for the taking of drugs

The people—police.

Petrified—feeling extremely high; the same as stoned, or perhaps a little higher.

Pill—a capsule

Pop—to take the drug by way of the needle but not injecting it into a vein.

Pusher—one who sells drugs to addicts.

Runner—one who delivers drugs.

Scene—the immediate neighborhood streets; same as turf.

Score—a successful robbery. Also success in an amatory affair.

Session—a gathering where a number of addicts shoot up.

Sharp—well-dressed

Shoot up—to take drugs by way of the needle.

Shooting party—a gathering where a number of addicts shoot up; same as session.

Sick—in need of the drug. The body reacts in various ways. There may be profuse sweating, cramps, headache, backache, restlessness, general irritation feelings of depression, anger, violence.

Sixteenth—one-sixteenth of an ounce of the drug.

Skin-pop—same as pop.

Sniff—to take the drug by sniffing it through the nose off the thumbnail, the cover of a matchbox, folded dollar bill, or through a straw.

Snort—*same as sniff.*

Solid—*okay.*

Sound—*to question, ask, bully, holler at, investigate, analyze, etc.*

Speedball—*a shot of heroin and cocaine together.*

Spik—*derogatory term for a Puerto Rican.*

Spike—*the needle.*

Stoned—*feeling extremely high, "blind," not quite as extreme as "petrified."*

Straighten—*to give one a free*

shot of the drug, or to pay back the same

Swing—*to cheat. Also to leave.*

Swung—*cheated.*

Take off—*to take the drug, shoot up.*

Taste—*a small dose of the drug.*

Turf—*the immediate neighborhood streets; same as scene.*

The works—*the needle, syringe, spoon, cotton, etc.*

Note: The argot of addiction is a fluid medium. Constantly changing and growing, the language varies somewhat in different sections of the country, and among different groups of people and individuals. With the rather sudden introduction of heroin to adolescents, a "new" language was adopted and has continued to grow. Certain words and phrases are discarded for new ones. Others remain. Some change their meaning slightly, or are used in a different way by different individuals. In particular, the elasticity of the whole argot should be noted, for many meanings and shades of meaning are derived from even a single word according to the way it may be coupled with others.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Authors have many different reasons for writing books. Some write for money, some for prestige. Hal Ellson writes out of anger—a sincere and intense conviction born of his knowledge that juvenile delinquency is as much the problem of society as it is of the individual.

For the past four years, in his work as a recreational therapist at a large, metropolitan institution, he has come into daily contact with the underprivileged and emotionally disturbed teen-agers about whom he writes. A number of books have been written on the subject of juvenile drug addiction. Hal Ellson's *Reefer Boy*, like his previously published novels, *Duke* and *Tomboy*, carries the stamp of absolute authenticity. More than two years of interviewing and several hundred pages of notes went into the preparation of the background for *Reefer Boy*. The Character of Chico is fictional, but every detail of his story has been corroborated by the experience of some boy or girl—not once but many times.

Mr. Ellson knows his characters thoroughly—what they think, how they talk, the terrible urgency and complexity of the emotional problems they face. But more than that, he brings to his writing a magnificent indignation and a deep compassion. The indignation is directed against a society that has so far proven unwilling or unable to give these young people the help they so desperately need. For the teen-agers themselves, he feels only sympathy. "It's easy to like good kids. Who doesn't? But these boys and girls are in trouble. They need all the help and understanding they can get."

As a writer, Hal Ellson is a phenomenon. A man of pro-

digious energy, he had already written several hundred short stories and thirty novels before *Duke*.

When his next novel, *Tomboy*, appeared it was hailed by the New York Herald Tribune as a book "whose characters actually emerge as people, rather than remaining names in a social service report. It provides touching insight into one of the tragic problems of big-city slums."

Both books were successful in attracting a large audience of readers, and their combined sale, in all editions, is now close to 3,000,000 copies.

